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BEDIUZZAMAN SAID NURSI'S DYNAMIC STRATEGY FOR THE RECONSTRUCTION OF MUSLIM SOCIETY: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Dr. Shumaila Majeed*

Abstract: This article investigates the dynamic strategy of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi in the context of the Ottoman decline for reconstructing Muslim society. First, it outlines the historical background of the Ottoman decline and Nursi's diagnosis of the causes of degradation of the Muslim world. This is followed by a detailed discussion of his proposed solutions to counteract the problems. Nursi's life is divided into two phases, each marked by a difference in circumstances that shaped his distinctive methodological scheme for revitalisation. This study explores the nature and reason behind the strategic change along with the process of developing a revised strategy. The article also analyses Nursi's contribution to resist the anti-religious policies of the Turkish government. Adapting a qualitative approach, the study finds that the Muslim decline resulted from multiple factors including educational downturn, backwardness in Islamic sciences, political instability, and neglecting Islamic teachings. Nursi sought to counter these problems with faith through investigation. He had foreseen that the aggressive strategies against the government would prove counterproductive. His dynamic strategy was grounded in wisdom and adaptability, which was instrumental in countering the onslaughts of anti-religious ideologies. His works can be of great assistance to understand the problems of the Muslim world today.

Keywords: *Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, decline reasons, reconstruction, dynamic strategy*

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INTRODUCTION

Bediuzzaman Said Nursi was born in the eastern part of the Ottoman Empire in 1877, which was a time of disgrace and defeat for the Muslim world in general and the Ottoman Empire in particular, once the centre of the Muslims' unity and political authority. This period was marked by the growing political, military, and economic influence of European powers. Anti-religion ideologies prevailing in Western Europe began to penetrate Muslim societies. Darwinism radically shaped the understanding of life and human existence, viewing humans merely as evolved species without Divine intervention. This rendered religion and God as unnecessary to understand life and its purpose. These developments shattered the Muslim world, which had traditionally assigned religion a central role in all matters of life, resulting in a socio-psychological depression.¹

In the Ottoman Empire, the response to these changes emerged as *Tanzimat*, a period between 1839 to 1876 in which Ottoman rulers and “their leading ministers introduced a series of reforms”² to restore Empire’s declining power. These reforms reorganised the institutes, i.e. administration, judiciary, education etc., on Western lines,³ leading to the secularisation of the institutes and “separation of the religious and worldly functions of the state.”⁴ The new secular schools – *rusdiye* – increased rapidly,⁵ which promoted European languages, particularly French, and sent students to Europe, expediting the influx of European ideas.⁶ Consequently, Enlightenment ideologies – for instance, secularism, nationalism, capitalism, socialism, materialism, positivism, naturalism – took root in Ottoman society, “impacting considerably the Ottoman intellectual life.”⁷ Eventually, there were various responses “to the nineteenth century question of European modernity and threat it posed to the integrity of the Ottoman state.”⁸

The first response emerged in the form of Ottomanism, which intended to secure the Empire without giving Islam a central social or political role.⁹ Proponents assumed Westernisation through moral and mental transformation in all spheres of life as the only

¹ Colin Turner and Hasan Horkuc, *Makers of Islamic Civilization: Said Nursi* (I.B.Tauris, 2009), 50.

² Sukran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (SUNY Press, 2012), 33–34.

³ For a detailed account on the Tanzimat, see Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (Hurst and Company, 1998), 144–59; Feroz Ahmad, *The Making of Modern Turkey* (Routledge London, 1993), 25–28; Carter V. Findley, *Bureaucratic Reform in the Ottoman Empire: The Sublime Porte, 1789–1922* (Princeton University Press, 1980), 201–18.

⁴ Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 34.

⁵ Şerif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (SUNY Press, 1989), 108.

⁶ Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 34.

⁷ Turner and Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 51–52. See also İlhan Yildiz, “The Search in the Transitional Period (1924–1950) for a Religious Educational Model,” in *Fifth International Symposium on Bediuzzaman Said Nursi: The Quranic View of Man according to Risale i Nur*, ed. Sukran Vahide (Sozler, 2000), 413.

⁸ Ibrahim M Abu-Rabi, “Editor’s Introduction: History, Politics and Charizma in Risale i Nur,” in *Spiritual Dimensions of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi’s Risale-I Nur*, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi (State University of New York Press, 2008), vii.

⁹ *Ibid.*

solution to avoid decadence.¹⁰ The second response came from Turkish Nationalists, called Turkism, which was aimed at the “cultural and political unification of Turks” based on common language, customs and traditions, disregarding religion and empire, sometimes incorporating Western political models for nationalist purposes.¹¹ The third response was Islamism, which emerged partially as a reaction to the Ottomanist and Nationalist schools. Many Muslim intellectuals turned against Westernisation when they realised the colonial European ambitions.¹² This was Islamism in nature that “opted to modernize the infrastructure of the Empire while preserving the status of Islam in society.”¹³ Nursi analysed the socio-religious impact of these modern intellectual currents and articulated his understanding of the challenges and solutions in his writings.

This article explores Nursi’s dynamic strategy to revitalise the decadent Muslim society of his time. It examines the causes of the Muslims’ decline from Nursi’s perspective and sheds light on his contributions as an intellectual resistant to the government’s anti-Muslim policies. It highlights the causes of the Muslims’ decline as well as the remedies Nursi suggested to reverse the decline. It also investigates the contributions of his work as a force of resistance. Nursi’s strategic shift for the reconstruction of society between his Old Said and New Said phases,¹⁴ and the factors behind this transformation, are also elaborated. Comprehending this evolution gives insight into his dynamic approach to reconstruction.

The study will be beneficial for research scholars in this field. It expands on current understandings of the reasons behind the Muslims’ downfall in the post scientific revolution world. It will also help enhance understanding of the problems the Muslim world faces today.

THE MAJOR FACTORS OF DECLINE IN NURSI’S VIEW

In Nursi’s vision, the factors mainly responsible for the Muslims’ decline were the education system of that time, weaknesses of Islamic sciences, and the incapability of the traditional Muslim intelligentsia to deal with the issue of modernity in late Ottoman society. As a consequence, the processes of Western modernity and Westernisation gave rise to a limited yet influential group of Ottoman, and subsequently Turkish, intellectuals who turned to Europe as a primary source of philosophical and intellectual guidance. Abu-Rabi describes:

Nursi points out that the main reasons behind this deterioration are ignorance, dictatorship, fanaticism, and the failure of the ulama to come to grip with the importance of modern

¹⁰ Berkes, *Development of Secularism*, 338.

¹¹ See M. Sukru Hanioglu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* (Princeton University Press, 2008), 147.

¹² M. Sait Ozervarli, “Said Nursi’s Project of Revitalizing Contemporary Islamic Thought,” in *Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-rabi (The State University of New York Press, 2003), 318.

¹³ Abu-Rabi, “Editor’s Introduction,” vii.

¹⁴ Nursi divided his life into two phases of Old Said and New Said due to his intellectual development. Later, experts in Nursi studies added the Third Said phase, because of another change in his circumstances and minor change in strategy.

sciences. ‘My Muslim contemporaries,’ referring to the ulama at the beginning of the twentieth century, ‘are memorabilia from the medieval age. They have failed to catch up with the progress in modern human thought.’ Nursi was right in singling out ignorance as the main cause of the decline of the modern Muslim world. He was enraged by the backward conditions many Muslims suffered. When referring to Eastern Turkey, Nursi discussed a much worse situation characterized by overwhelming illiteracy due to the control of ‘the men of religion.’ As a committed Muslim, he was fierce in his rejection of the historical conditions of his people. He believed strongly that an overall reform through education was the best means to eradicate these problems.¹⁵

In addition, Nursi considers the political conditions of that time, particularly despotism and nationalism to be causes of the decline. He identifies “various sicknesses in the social life of Muslims and in the field of morality”¹⁶ due to which Muslims, as compared to other nations, were left behind on the way to progress. Most importantly, the negligent attitude of Muslims towards the pillars of Islam was a major factor contributing to their decadence in Nursi’s view. A brief analysis of these factors of decline and their backgrounds will elaborate why they were Nursi’s focus.

Education System as Major Cause of Decline

In Nursi’s vision, the downturn in the area of education was due to three rival systems working simultaneously in the Empire. The first was the traditional religious schools or *madrassah*, the second was modern schools or *maktab*, and the third was Sufi lodges called *tareeqa* or *zawiya*.¹⁷

As far as the first educational system is concerned, it was still following the unchanged curriculum of the 15th century.¹⁸ Although it included religious and theological sciences, modern (natural and physical) sciences were totally ignored.¹⁹ As a result, this system was producing graduates who were unaware of modern advancements and unable to combat the threats of materialistic atheism. Moreover, the dilapidated buildings and lack of facilities reflected statesmen’s deliberate neglect. The purpose was to lessen the influence of religious scholars and this attitude of neglect increased during the time of Sultan Abdulhamid II.²⁰ Although other Ottoman Muslim scholars realised and occasionally expressed this problem, for instance Ali Suavi and Hoja Muhyiddin, their ideas could not be applied.²¹ However, the situation of the *madrassah* in Eastern Anatolia, the region where Said Nursi grew up and

¹⁵ Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi, “How to Read Said Nursi’s Risale i Nur,” in *Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi (SUNY Press, 2003), 75–6.

¹⁶ Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 161.

¹⁷ Sukran Vahide, *The Author of the Risale-i Nur: Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Sozler Publications, 2010), 57.

¹⁸ Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 44.

¹⁹ Ali Mermer, “Aspects of Religious Identity: The Nurcu Movement in Turkey Today” (PhD diss., University of Durham, 1985), 488, accessed October 28, 2025, <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/1614/>.

²⁰ Mardin, *Religion and Social Change*, 110–13; Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 44.

²¹ Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 44.

acquired his education, was to some extent better due to the influence of Naqshbandi and its successor Khalidi order.²² However, here also the focus was only on religious sciences.

The other system was the *maktab* or modern secular schools, established as a result of Tanzimat reforms and a process continued by Sultan Abdulhamid,²³ respectively. The focus of this system was physical and modern sciences, which was the reverse of the classical *madrassah*. Religious studies were not considered and the attitude towards religion was, to an extent, hostile. The reason for establishing modern schools throughout the Ottoman regions was to fill the gap of scientific knowledge between the East and West. For this purpose, students were sent to Europe, especially France, to pursue their studies.²⁴ Original or translated works of European philosophers and scientists, such as Ludwig Buchner, Ernst Heackel, J. William Draper, and Auguste Comte, were included in the curriculum of the “newly established Western style schools, and especially in the famous Medical School (Mekteb-i Tibbiye).”²⁵ As a result, students from these schools began to believe life as a materialistic event. Thus, a mindset developed for blind imitation of European civilisation to walk in the modern age. Basically, this system of education produced a “pro-Western Turkish elite in the Ottoman Empire,”²⁶ who under the influence of materialist philosophy turned hostile towards religion, later undermined the political system of the Empire, and finally succeeded in abolishing and establishing a secularised Turkish Republic.

The third structure of education system was that of Sufi *tareeqa* or establishments called *tekke*.²⁷ These were informal learning centres that relied mainly on an oral mode of education yet were influential in Ottoman society.²⁸

This divergent system was not only the major reason for the decadence of Ottoman Muslims but also proved to be a factor of disunity because people educated from one system of education turned hostile towards the other two. Nursi says:

The people of the *medreses* accuse those of the *mektebs* of weakness in belief because of their literalist interpretation of certain matters, while the latter look on the former as ignorant and unreliable because they have no knowledge of modern science. Then the scholars of the *medreses* regard the people of the *tekkes* as followers of innovations.²⁹

Under these circumstances, Nursi felt the necessity for educational reforms and formulated a detailed educational plan, which chiefly was based on the foundation of a central institute in

²² For further details regarding the influence of the Khalidi order in Eastern Anatolia, see *ibid.*, 4–5, 44; Mardin, *Religion and Social Change*, 54–60; Serif Mardin, “Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1873–1960): The Shaping of a Vocation,” in *Religious Organization*, ed. J. Davis (Academic Press, 1982), 72–3.

²³ For details, see Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 34–5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 34; Ozervarli, “Nursi’s Project of Revitalizing,” 317.

²⁵ Ozervarli, “Nursi’s Project of Revitalizing,” 317–18. Also see M. Sukru Hanioglu, *The Young Turks in Opposition* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 16.

²⁶ Ozervarli, “Nursi’s Project of Revitalizing,” 317–18.

²⁷ *Tekke* is a building designed specifically for the gatherings of a Sufi brotherhood.

²⁸ For details and the history about when and how Sufism’s effects began to emerge in Ottoman society, see Serif Mardin, “The Naksibendi Order in Turkish History,” in *Islam in Modern Turkey: Religion, Politics and Literature in a Secular State*, ed. Richard Tapper (I.B. Tauris, 1994), 121–42.

²⁹ Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 48.

the eastern provinces of the Empire where all three systems of education could be united and positive aspects of these structures could be benefited from.³⁰ For him, this was the only solution to save “students of secular schools from becoming atheists and students of medreses from becoming fanatics.”³¹ Nursi reveals his experience when he came to Istanbul: “I saw and understood that Islam was behind, far behind the civilization of our times... There were three culprits of this decline: the Doctors of Islamic law, those who had not understood Europe [i.e. Westernist] and the members of mystic orders (*tareeqa*).”³²

Weaknesses of Islamic Sciences

Another major factor of the downfall of Muslims, Nursi realised, was a weakness of Islamic sciences, i.e. Muslim theological sciences (*ilm al kalam*) and Islamic sciences of the Qur’anic commentary (*tafsir*). The traditional form of Muslim theology became weaker over time and had lost its power to defend Islam from the recent attacks of materialistic philosophy, which raised doubts and criticisms on the issues of belief. This also “led him to take the momentous step of learning the modern science – something unprecedented among the scholars (*ulama*) of the eastern provinces.”³³ In Nursi’s opinion: “[P]revious texts of Islamic theology were mainly theoretical discussions at a philosophical level that could do nothing to answer the critical questions of modernity, and to satisfy the spiritual crisis of a transforming society.”³⁴

An important point is that Nursi was anticipating an alarming danger to Muslims’ belief. He understood during the early phase of his life that the challenges of this age to Muslims were different from that of the past. In former times, ignorance endangered a Muslim’s belief, but now it was misinterpretation of science and philosophy to promote materialist interpretations that challenged religious belief. He mentions “if misguidance arises from ignorance it is easy to dispel. Whereas if it proceeds from science and learning, it is difficult to eliminate.”³⁵ He also notes, in earlier times “unbelief arising from doubts” could be “quickly dispelled,” whereas in the modern period “those who lose their way due to science and learning... have increased a hundredfold.”³⁶

Therefore, he stressed the urgent need for revitalisation of the Islamic sciences of *kalam* and *tafsir*. That is why he also penned *Muhakemat* (The Reasonings) to set the principles of Qur’anic exegesis that should be followed in present time.³⁷ Following these principles, he also wrote an incomplete interpretation of the Qur’an titled *Isharat ul Ijaz* (The Signs of

³⁰ For details see Shumaila Majeed, “Bediuzzaman Said Nursi’s Approach to Reconstruction of Muslim Society: An Analytical Study” (PhD diss., University of the Punjab, 2018), 57, accessed October 28, 2025, <https://www.risaleresearch.com/detail?id=10050>.

³¹ Mermer, “Aspects of Religious Identity”, 488.

³² Mardin, *Religion and Social Change*, 82.

³³ Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 27-8.

³⁴ M. Sait Ozervarli, “The Reconstruction of Islamic Social Thought in the Modern Period: Nursi’s Approach to Religious Discourse in a Changing Society,” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 38 (2010): 537.

³⁵ Said Nursi, *The Letters*, trans. Sukran Vahide (Sozler, 2010), 41.

³⁶ Said Nursi, *The Damascus Sermon*, trans. Sukran Vahide (Sozler, 2012), 23.

³⁷ Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 193.

Miraculousness). Nursi's vision strengthened gradually over time. As far as Nursi's opinion about the condition of *kalam* is concerned, "he realised that the classical form and methods of philosophy and theology were inadequate for answering immediately and satisfactorily the doubts that had been raised in the modern age."³⁸

Likewise, Nursi indicates problems in Qur'anic commentaries and their methodologies, which he attributed to the Muslims decline. He points out in *Muhakemat* that the biggest mistake of commentators was to consult earlier non-Muslim sources called *Isra'iliyyat* and ancient Greek philosophy, which made the reality of Islam ambiguous.³⁹ He also criticises the careless aptitude of Muslim scholars to focus more attention on controversial matters, which form only ten percent of religious matters in their commentaries and books of jurisprudence compared to the "essentials of faith [obligatory religious principles] which characterize the majority of the subjects in the Quran [that forms 90 percent of religion] and not the legal disagreements between scholars."⁴⁰

Political Factors of Decline

Nursi also saw political factors as contributing to the Muslim downfall, just like the sad state of education. He believed the most glaring of political causes was that the Muslim world was in the grip of despotism. He called it un-Islamic because Islam demands that people be slave to one true God not to the worldly rulers. A true Muslim, according to Nursi, would not abase himself before anyone apart from God. The power of God could only be realised by gaining freedom from tyrants, which will in turn free an individual from oppression and persecution.⁴¹ This was precisely why Nursi was against the absolutist rule of Sultan Abdulhamid II, whose time saw Islam reduce to a state ideology.⁴² He joined the Young Turks to further the cause of Constitutional reforms during his stay in Istanbul from 1907 onward. When Sultan Abdulhamid was enthroned in 1876, he promised a constitution and parliamentary system for his people. However, he did not keep this promise for long and suspended the constitution in 1878 by dissolving parliament. Thus, he became an absolute autocrat and ruled for about 30 years.⁴³ The Young Turks Movement, which started as a secret organisation in 1889, comprised dissenting students, officers and intellectuals who were against Abdulhamid's rule. The organisation was renamed the Committee of Union and

³⁸ Ozervarli, "The Reconstruction," 537–38.

³⁹ Said Nursi, *The Reasonings (Muhakemat): A Key to Understanding the Qu'ran's Eloquence*, trans.

Huseyin Akarsu (Tughra Books, 2008), 3, 16, 18–19; Majeed, "Nursi's Approach to Reconstruction."

⁴⁰ Ozervarli, "Nursi's Project of Revitalizing," 322. See also Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 92, 162–63. For further explanation, see Majeed, "Nursi's Approach to Reconstruction."

⁴¹ For details, see Nursi, *Damascus Sermon*, 56–7. For more explanation, see and compare Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity*, 153–54.

⁴² Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity*, 153. Nursi was not completely against Sultan, it was that aspect of Sultan's policies which Nursi criticised and exclaimed as non-Islamic. See Hamid Algar, "Said Nursi and the Risale-i Nur: An Aspect of Islam in Contemporary Turkey," in *Islamic Perspectives Studies in Honour of Mawlana Sayyid Abul Alamawdudi*, ed. Khurshid Ahmad and Zafar Ishaq Ansari (The Islamic Foundation, 1979), 316.

⁴³ Erik J. Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History* (IB Tauris, 2004), 74; Ahmad, *The Making*, 31.

Progress (CUP).⁴⁴ Some of its prominent members included figures such as Enver Pasha and Cemal Pasha, who played significant roles in the CUP and late Ottoman politics, as well as Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who later emerged as the leading figure in the establishment of the Republic of Turkey. The most important achievement of the CUP was its successful army rebellion of 1908, known as Constitutional Revolution or Young Turk revolution, as the result of which the Sultan was forced to restore the Constitution.⁴⁵

Nursi had supported the constitutional revolution of the CUP because he believed that constitutionalism and freedom were essential for the establishment of Muslim civilisation and progress of Ottoman Empire.⁴⁶ However, he was soon disillusioned by the CUP's policies of Turkish nationalism and exploitative use of Islam. This was the parting of ways between the CUP and Nursi, who started writing essays for the pan-Islamic Society for Muslim Unity (*Ittihad-i Muhammedi*). In his articles he criticised the government's policies.⁴⁷ In 1909, a fierce rebellion broke out against the oppression of the CUP under the leadership of Darvish Vahdeti, the head of the *Ittihad-i Muhammedi*, also joined by other civilians and intellectuals demanding the implementation of *shari'ah*. On 9 April, the operational corps controlled by the CUP entered Istanbul, arrested the rebellion leadership and executed many people to restore the CUP government. They replaced Sultan Abdulhamid with Sultan Mehmed Resad (1909–1918), established their power more firmly than ever before and continued their rule until the defeat of the Ottomans in WWI.⁴⁸ Nursi had no direct involvement in the rebellion; rather, he convinced a group of soldiers to desist from rebellion and return to their barracks. Nonetheless, he was arrested for his connections with the Society for Muslim Unity, which was deemed responsible for instigating rebellion. Nursi took this incident as an opportunity to support his cause and delivered an inspiring speech as his defense propagating the virtues of constitutionalism and freedom. He was released later.⁴⁹ This rebellion of 9 April 1909 is famously known as the 31 March incident.⁵⁰ Yavuz mentions it as “a defining event for state-society relations in the late Ottoman Empire and the Republican period.”⁵¹ He illustrates:

The CUP presented the rebellion, which was prompted by social and political discontent, as a ‘reactionary’ event against a progressive government. Since then, almost all anti centralization and anti-Westernization opposition has been framed as ‘reactionary’. The

⁴⁴ Zurcher, *Turkey*, 69–70; Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (Oxford University Press, 1961), 197–200; Ahmad, *The Making*, 30.

⁴⁵ Ahmad, *The Making*, 2.

⁴⁶ Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 59–64; Sukran Vahide, “The Life and Times of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi,” *The Muslim World* 89 (1999): 216; Sukran Vahide, “Toward an Intellectual Biography of Said Nursi,” in *Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi (State University of New York Press, 2003), 5.

⁴⁷ Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity*, 153.

⁴⁸ Ahmad, *The Making*, 2; Zurcher, *Turkey*, 76–7; Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity*, 153; Algar, “Nursi and Risale-i Nur,” 315–16.

⁴⁹ Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity*, 153.

⁵⁰ This difference is due to the Ottoman and Gregorian calendars.

⁵¹ Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity*, 153.

discourse of ‘reactionary’ became the popular tool for excluding religious people from politics and delegitimizing any form of religious entry into the public sphere.⁵²

He continued his mission this time focusing on common people delivering speeches on the value of constitutionalism and freedom to “Kurdish porters.” “He impressed on them that their threefold enemies of poverty, ignorance, and internal enmity [the problems of the Muslim community] should be combated with ‘education, industry and unity.’”⁵³

Another important factor Nursi identified as undermining for the Ottoman Empire and Muslim world in general was nationalism. It gained ground in the wake of the French Revolution and provided impetus for the separatist movements in the Balkans and Arab territories of the Empire. These movements kept the Ottoman Empire in a state of turmoil as they had to face challenges on external and internal fronts. In response to these nationalist movements, pan-Turkism, based on Turkish ethnicity, flourished.⁵⁴ Ahmad elucidates:

For the rest of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, until their empire was destroyed, the Turks tried to suppress one national movement after another. In the end they too adopted nationalism, waged their own struggle and set up a national state of their own.⁵⁵

Nursi was against all movements that were based on ethnic nationalism. Despite his Kurdish roots, he played down the importance of ethnic origin and emphasized the collective representation of Islam in the modern era.⁵⁶ He disagreed with the notion that either race or ethnicity should serve as the basis of nation-formation on Muslims. Rather “ethnic conflicts [near him] were the only causes of disunity in society”⁵⁷. In contrast, Nursi maintained that “our nation is only Islam,” and that “the strongest bond of Arabs, Turks, Kurds, Albanians, Circassians and Laz ... is nothing other than Islam,” thereby grounding unity and nationhood in a shared religious identity.⁵⁸

Negligence of Basic Pillars of Islam

Nursi opines Muslim civilisation is a true civilisation because it is based on revelation as compared to the Western civilisation which is based on materialist philosophy. But the question is why have Muslims been materially defeated by Western civilisation? Nursi replies: it is because of their negligent attitude towards basic pillars of Islam which is a serious mistake of Muslims⁵⁹ due to which they suffered the calamities of WWI. For example, he says:

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Vahide, “Toward an Intellectual Biography,” 6–7.

⁵⁴ Ozervarli, “The Reconstruction,” 547. For further details about nationalism in the Ottoman Empire, see Ahmad, *The Making*, 4; Zurcher, *Turkey*, 67–8.

⁵⁵ Ahmad, *The Making*, 24.

⁵⁶ Ozervarli, “The Reconstruction,” 547–48. For further details, see Abu-Rabi, “How to Read Risale,” 62.

⁵⁷ Ozervarli, “The Reconstruction,” 548.

⁵⁸ Nursi, *Damascus Sermon*, 83.

⁵⁹ For details, see Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 160–61.

Exalted Creator wanted and commanded us only one hour for the five daily prayers, but we neglected due to laziness...so we received the punishment in the form of performing prayers of a sort these last five years by constant twenty-four hour drill and hardship, being driven on and made to strive.⁶⁰

Similarly, about fasting, Nursi states: “[the Creator] also wanted of us one month’s fasting a year, but we pitied ourselves, so in atonement He compelled us to fast for five years.”⁶¹ Likewise, in Nursi’s vision, neglecting *zakat* and *hajj* has put Muslims into terrible conditions of the time and “this sinful nation took its ablutions with its blood.”⁶²

The question similar to the above regarding Muslims’ material backwardness as compared to non-believers has also been dealt with in the Damascus Sermon, where Nursi identified six dire (socio-moral) sicknesses as contributing factors: 1) Despair among the people, which has become a living and pervasive reality in social life; 2) The death of truthfulness in social and political life; 3) Love of enmity; 4) Not knowing the luminous bonds that bind the believers to one another; 5) Despotism (dictatorship), which spreads, becoming widespread as though it was contagious (infectious) diseases; and 6) Restricting endeavour to what is personally beneficial.⁶³

Likewise, at another place in the Damascus Sermon, Nursi identifies poverty, ignorance and (internal) conflict as major problems of the Muslim world that are weakening its base. Nursi suggests, instead of blaming European civilisation, Muslims should realise it is actually these three enemies that are causing immorality and bad conduct among Muslims, preventing them from upholding the word of God, moreover producing strife and hatred by attacking their union.⁶⁴ In addition, Nursi states these three elements of Muslims’ behaviour are “a root cause of their social upheaval.”⁶⁵ Nursi asserts the application of the Qur’anic ordinances of almsgiving and prohibition of interest to eliminate disharmony among the upper and lower social classes of humanity.⁶⁶

NURSI’S APPROACH TO RECONSTRUCTION

Nursi, in his Old Said phase, identified different reasons for Muslims decline and exerted himself to save the Ottoman Empire mainly with twin tools:⁶⁷ political reforms, particularly restoration of constitutional system of government, and educational reforms. Unfortunately, his efforts could not bear fruitful results as the Empire ended in the wake of WWI followed by the establishment of Turkish Republic through which another phase of Turkish history

⁶⁰ Said Nursi, *The Words*, trans. Sukran Vahide (Sozler, 2010), 748–49.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ For details on solutions to these sicknesses, see Nursi, *Damascus Sermon*, 26–7. For further details and explanations, see Thomas Michel, “Said Nursi’s Damascus Sermon: A Spiritual Physician’s Prescription for the Sicknesses of our Age,” in *Said Nursi’s Views on Muslim-Christian Understanding*, ed. Sukran Vahide (Soz Basim Yayin ltd, 2005), 22–28; Majeed, “Nursi’s Approach to Reconstruction.”

⁶⁴ Nursi, *Damascus Sermon*, 85.

⁶⁵ Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 160.

⁶⁶ Nursi, *The Letters*, 533.

⁶⁷ Turner, *The Qur’an Revealed*, 519.

commenced. The challenges of this epoch were different. Now “Ottoman modernists” became the “policymakers of new state” for whom, as Turner explains, “Islam and the Islamic way of life were deemed responsible for centuries of backwardness and lack of development in science and technology. There was only one solution: Islam had to be removed from social, public and political structures.”⁶⁸

Nursi had anticipated that the upcoming challenge would be different so his methodology should also change. This is considered the turning point in his life when he emerged as New Said with a revived methodology for reconstruction. In his early phase, particularly before 1925, Nursi viewed the preservation of political authority as a means to support Islam and sought to make politics serve religion. However, he later distanced himself from political engagement, arguing that politics fosters partisanship and polarisation, where individuals judge others not on truth but on party affiliation—elevating their side and degrading opponents. Recognising the ethical and spiritual dangers of such polarisation, he abandoned political activism and turned instead to the revival of faith. That is why the works of Old Said and New Said are different from each other. In subsequent works, Nursi sought to “iman-ise society, rather than to Islamicise the political authority and institutions, as in the Makkan period of Prophet Muhammad’s (pbuh) life.”⁶⁹

In his renewed vision, Nursi focused his attention entirely to reconstruction of belief by concentrating on the training of individuals. The methodology he adopted was spiritual. But his spiritual did not mean Sufism, which does not have any role of ‘reason’ in it. Instead, Nursi’s spiritual training works with an alliance of heart and mind by purifying the former and illuminating the latter. He disconnected from all types of political activism and guided his disciples not to participate in political matters. In addition, the nature of Nursi’s method for reconstruction in this phase was bottom up as compared to the earlier phase, which was top down.⁷⁰ He turned his attention to saving belief because after the establishment of the Turkish Republic, the country’s Muslim population came under the harmful effects of political and institutional reforms of Mustafa Kemal. Ayduz explains:

It was a period in which every sort of religious enterprise was labelled ‘a reactionary movement’; religiously minded people who performed worship even privately were disturbed; when both reading and teaching the Qur’an were forbidden; blameless religious scholars were sent to the scaffold due to unfounded suspicions; and severe penalties were inflicted for the teaching of religion.⁷¹

Therefore, these circumstances provided Nursi with an important opportunity to formulate his discourse and work toward rebuilding society based on authentic Qur’anic belief.

⁶⁸ Turner and Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 51–3.

⁶⁹ Hasan Horkuc, “Said Nursi’s Ideal for Human Society: Moral and Social Reform in the Risale-i Nur” (PhD diss., University of Durham, 2004), accessed October 28, 2025, <http://theses.dur.ac.uk/1754/1/1754.pdf>.

⁷⁰ Colin Turner, *The Qur’an Revealed: A Critical Analysis of Said Nursi’s Epistles of Light* (Gerlach Press, 2013), 540; Horkuc, “Nursi’s Ideal”, 292.

⁷¹ Davud Ayduz, “Guidance and Teblig in the Risale-i Nur,” in *Third International Symposium on Bediuzzaman Said Nursi: The Reconstruction of Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century and Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, ed. Sukran Vahide (Sozler, 1995), 190.

Furthermore, Nursi found a favourable environment for promoting his ideas about the comprehensive involvement of the individual in Islam.⁷² For this purpose, Nursi devoted his efforts to direct personal communication and placed greater emphasis on individuals, believing that society could not be reformed without disciplined people whose hearts were filled with moral fulfilment. Since one of the central concerns of the Qur'an is to guide believers toward higher aims and ethical perfection, Nursi shifted his attention away from politics and toward the moral and spiritual transformation of individuals.⁷³ Serif Mardin explains Nursi's notion of preferring individuals for training:

Bediüzzaman does not have a holistic understanding of society: He sees society as made up of persons...These persons are not real but 'virtual' persons. They are defined not as individuals, but as positions or roles that those persons would fill. The 'Good Society' is one where this pyramid of rules—derived from the Qur'an—is constituted.⁷⁴

Subsequently, these circumstances led Nursi to shift his focus to the spiritual renewal of individuals, believing the damage caused by the modern philosophies of materialism was mainly spiritual. This revived method of spiritual renewal comprises grooming the heart and mind simultaneously.⁷⁵ His intellectual growth passed through different stages and the result of his relentless contemplation and assimilating new ideas enabled him to devise more effective strategies as an answer to the prevailing circumstances. Colin Turner termed his developmental journey as a process from the Old Said to the New Said and then finally to the Third Said.⁷⁶

Process of Finding Appropriate Methodology for Reconstruction of Society

In his early phase, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi believed the harms produced by the materialist philosophy of Europe should be countered with its tools—a rational method.⁷⁷ He held that European science and philosophy, when properly understood, could be used to reinforce and strengthen Islam.⁷⁸ As Sukran Vahide notes, Nursi initially engaged deeply with philosophical and Islamic sciences, viewing them as means to intellectual and spiritual development.⁷⁹ In this regard, Nursi emphasised the compatibility of religion and science, arguing that “the light of the conscience is the religious sciences, and the light of the mind is

⁷² Turner and Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 53; Mardin, *Religion and Social Change*, 179.

⁷³ Ozerverli, “The Reconstruction,” 540.

⁷⁴ Mardin, *Religion and Social Change*, 171.

⁷⁵ See Zeki Saritoprak, “Islam and Politics in the Light of Said Nursi's Writings,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 19 (2008): 118; Mohd Farid Mohd Shahrani, “Said Nursi's Theologico-Spiritual Framework in Risale-i Nur: Revivalism of a Religious Worldview through a Contemporary Approach,” *International Journal of the Humanities* 8 (2010): 272; Horkuc, “Nursi's Ideal,” 168–69.

⁷⁶ Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed*, 515.

⁷⁷ Sukran Vahide, “Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Approach to Religious Renewal and its Impact on Aspects of Contemporary Turkish Society,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Contemporary Islamic Thought*, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi (Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 58.

⁷⁸ Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 164. Nursi differentiates philosophy in terms of its negative and positive impacts. As Horkuc mentions “we might describe him as an Islamic philosopher who, on the one hand, rejects the harmful outcomes of (negative) philosophy, but on the other hand welcomed other [positive] outcomes of philosophy such as reason, science and progress.” See Horkuc, “Nursi's Ideal,” 175.

⁷⁹ Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 164.

the natural sciences,” and truth emerges through their integration.⁸⁰ He further maintained that neglect of modern sciences leads to fanaticism, while the absence of religious knowledge results in scepticism.

That is why Nursi’s early writings were philosophical. For instance, in *Munazarat* (Debates) and *Muhakemat* (Reasonings), published in 1910 and 1911, respectively, he used a philosophical methodology while dealing with contemporary Muslim issues. But during the phase when he went through spiritual turmoil, he became disturbed, went into isolation for two years and spent his time in contemplation. He concluded that these sciences could not help him to solve his spiritual problems; rather, he realised they had been an obstacle to his spiritual growth.⁸¹ Thus, he felt these sciences were unable to solve the spiritual problems of the people in this age. He comprehended that, since these were purely based on reason, whenever only reason was used, it raised nothing except doubts and scepticism. After this realisation, the next path that Nursi examined to find out appropriate methodology for reconstruction of society was *Sufism*.⁸²

Sufism was an attractive path for Nursi and he had been under its influence since his childhood,⁸³ owing to the strong presence of various Sufi orders in eastern Anatolia where he was born and raised. He appreciated the historical role of the *tareeqah* (institutionalised Sufi orders) in deepening the religious understanding of Muslims in the Ottoman context,⁸⁴ and held the major Sufi masters in high regard.⁸⁵ However, while engaged in a broader methodological search,⁸⁶ he began to question the adequacy of Sufism in addressing the emerging intellectual challenges posed by positivism and materialism.⁸⁷

In former times, Nursi believes, faith had never been as endangered as it was in the present time;⁸⁸ thus, peoples’ belief in God was firm and whoever needed to increase their level of belief used to consult Sufism, which was undoubtedly a long and hard way to go.⁸⁹ Meanwhile, in the present age, faith was in danger due to the materialist attacks of philosophy, so the crucial task was to save it first.⁹⁰ Subsequently, Sufism was insufficient to

⁸⁰ Saritoprak, “Islam and Politics,” 124.

⁸¹ Said Nursi, *The Flashes*, trans. Sukran Vahide (Sozler, 2010), 305. For further explanations, see Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 164–66.

⁸² For details, see Horkuc, “Nursi’s Ideal,” 173, 175–77; Suleyman Hayri Bolay, “Bediuzzaman’s View of Philosophy,” in *Third International Symposium on Bediuzzaman Said Nursi: The Reconstruction of Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century and Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, ed. Sukran Vahide (Sozler, 1995), 255, 277.

⁸³ For examples, see Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 4–5.

⁸⁴ Shahrani, “Nursi’s Theologico-Spiritual Framework,” 272.

⁸⁵ However, he never joined any Sufi order during his life and made it clear that his faith-based movement was something new and different from Sufism. See Zeynep Akbulut Kuru and Ahmet T. Kuru, “Apolitical Interpretation of Islam: Said Nursi’s Faith-Based Activism in Comparison with Political Islamism and Sufism,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 19 (2008): 111; Ozervarli, “Nursi’s Project of Revitalizing,” 321.

⁸⁶ Horkuc, “Nursi’s Ideal,” 175.

⁸⁷ Kuru and Kuru, “Apolitical Interpretation,” 105–6; Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 166.

⁸⁸ Nursi, *Damascus Sermon*, 23.

⁸⁹ Nursi, *The Letters*, 510, 17.

⁹⁰ For an explanation of Nursi’s notion of faith being in danger as compared to the past, see Algar, “Nursi and Risale-i Nur,” 320–21; Hamid Algar, “The Centennial Renewer: Bediüzzaman Said Nursi and the

solve the present issues because of two causes. First, “Sufism requires total submission, which is extremely difficult for the people of modern age.” Second, “today’s Muslims, Nursi emphasizes, need rational proof to support their faith,”⁹¹ whereas Sufism is solely based on heart (intuition).⁹² Therefore, Nursi found Sufism inadequate to solve the rational problems of his age and it was a hard and lengthy way for the people of his time. Whereas philosophy, he concluded, was an inappropriate solution for spiritual matters. He therefore sought a method that could integrate rational and spiritual dimensions. Finally, his search resolved on the Qur’anic method.⁹³ Nursi illustrates:

While thus bewildered, it was imparted to my heart by God’s mercy that the head of these various ways and the source of these streams and the sun of these planets is the All-Wise Qur’an; the true single qibla [direction] is to be found in it.⁹⁴

This search is vividly illustrated by his account. During a period of spiritual and intellectual unrest, Nursi turned to classical Sufi works such as Abdul Qadir Gilani’s *Futuh al-Ghayb* and Ahmad Sirhindi’s *Maktubat*. He recounts that, on opening *Futuh al-Ghayb*, he encountered advice urging him to seek a cure for his spiritual illness, prompting deep self-reflection. He later consulted Sirhindi’s *Maktubat*, where the repeated advice to “make your qibla one” left him in a state of uncertainty, as he felt unable to confine himself to a single spiritual guide. This dilemma was ultimately resolved when he realised that the true and ultimate *qibla* is the Qur’an; as he states, “the true single qibla is to be found in it.”⁹⁵ This realisation marked a decisive turning point in his intellectual and methodological development, leading him to adopt a Qur’an-centred approach that could address the rational and spiritual challenges of the modern age.⁹⁶

Thus, Nursi’s enlightenment comprises three stages. First, realisation of the deficiency of human philosophy. Second, discovery of the incompatibility of Sufism with the modern age. Thirdly and finally, with the emergence of the New Said, he came to understand—through the *Maktubat* of Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi—that he should take the Qur’an as his sole guide. Near the end of his life, Nursi is reported to have elaborated on his methodological search, as recounted by his student Mustafa Sungur:

Sixty years ago, I was searching for a way to reach reality that was appropriate for the present age. That is, I was searching for a short way to obtain firm faith and a complete understanding of Islam that would not be shaken by the attacks of the numerous damaging currents. First I had recourse to the way of the philosophers; I wanted to reach the truth with just the reason. But I reached it only twice with extreme difficulty. Then I looked and saw that even the greatest geniuses of mankind had gone only half the way, and that only one or two had been able to reach the truth by means of the reason alone. So I told myself

Tradition of Tajdid,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 12 (2001): 305–6; Horkuc, “Nursi’s Ideal,” 179; Kuru and Kuru, “Apolitical Interpretation,” 105–6.

⁹¹ Kuru and Kuru, “Apolitical Interpretation,” 105–6. Also see and compare, Horkuc, “Nursi’s Ideal,” 179.

⁹² Nursi, *The Letters*, 510. For details on Nursi’s concept of Sufism, see Nursi, *The Letters*, 507–26.

⁹³ For details on how Nursi found this way, see Vahide, “Toward an Intellectual Biography,” 10–11.

⁹⁴ Nursi, *The Letters*, 410.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 419.

⁹⁶ For the whole story, see *ibid.*, 418–19.

that a way that even they had been unable to take could not be made general, and I gave it up...Then I had recourse to the way of *Sufism* and studied it. I saw that it was truly luminous and effulgent, but that it needed the greatest caution. Only the highest of the elite could take that way. So, saying that this cannot be the way for everyone at this time, either, I sought help from the Qur'an. And thanks be to God, the *Risale-i Nur* was bestowed on me, which is a safe, short way inspired by the Qur'an for the believers of the present time."⁹⁷

This is what Nursi was searching for – that he could proceed through an association of the heart and mind. Thus, he found a way to employ both human faculties through the guidance of the Qur'an. Before curing any other, this method cured Nursi's "wounded spirit and heart, and silencing Satan and the evil-commanding soul, rescued him from doubts and skepticism."⁹⁸ This was the New Said's Qur'an-based method, which he followed in the *Risale-i Nur*, his thematic interpretation of the Qur'an.

Nursi's Qur'an-Based Method in the Risale-i Nur

The central component of Nursi's method in the *Risale* is reflective thought (*tafakkur*), a principle rooted in the Qur'an. The Qur'an repeatedly encourages human beings to contemplate and observe the world around them. Drawing on this Qur'anic approach, Nursi developed the concept of *iman-i tahqiqi* (belief grounded in investigation and verification). His primary aim was to cultivate an active and living faith among people, achieved through conscious understanding, affirmation, and personal verification. This approach stands in contrast to *iman-i taqlidi* (imitative belief), which, according to Nursi, is vulnerable to doubt and uncertainty. A central concept within this method is *mana-i harfi*. Vahide explains:

mana-i harfi (other indicative or the significative meaning of things), a term [Nursi] borrowed from Arabic grammar by which he meant considering or reading things for the meanings they express and on account of their Maker; in other words, the Qur'anic viewpoint or way of looking at things. This is in contradistinction to materialistic science and philosophy, which look on beings as signifying only themselves (*mana-i ismi* – the nominal meaning of things). [In addition] Belief by investigation may be attained through reasoning reflective thought on the divine works and names, and rises in degree and strength to the number of the names and cosmic truths that are thus comprehended.⁹⁹

In this way, the whole universe, according to Nursi, can be observed or read like a book, which he called the "Book of Universe."¹⁰⁰ Not content with that point, Nursi's method of reflective thought also includes reflection on man's inner world to reach the reality of the Creator.¹⁰¹

This method served Nursi on several fronts. First, it answered the questions raised by materialism against religious beliefs, for example regarding nature and causality; thus, this

⁹⁷ Cited in Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 166–67.

⁹⁸ Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 167.

⁹⁹ Vahide, "Nursi's Approach to Religious Renewal," 59, 60.

¹⁰⁰ Numerous treatises in the *Risale-i Nur* elucidate the harmony of religion and modern sciences, looking at the Book of Universe with *mana-i harfi*. For instance, see Nursi, *The Words*, 243.

¹⁰¹ For details, see Majeed, "Nursi's Approach to Reconstruction," 189–237.

method took the role of Muslim theology (*ilm al kalam*). Second, this method played an important role in the revitalisation of individuals' belief. Third, it satisfied the human spiritual faculty. This is the reason why the *Risale* satisfies all the intellectual, spiritual, and religious needs of a person. Vahide comments: "These and other features of Nursi's writings made them readily accessible to all sorts of people, whatever their level of understanding."¹⁰² Nursi's method, propagated through the *Risale*, proved beneficial in the circumstances following the establishment of Turkish Republic. At a time when many means of acquiring a religious education were banned, the *Risale* was a beacon of hope for people to quench their religious thirst. Following section will throw light on those terrible conditions and the *Risale*'s role.

GOVERNMENT'S ANTI-RELIGIOUS MEASURES AND THE ROLE OF THE *RISALE-I NUR*

The defeat of the Ottoman state in WWI (1918) resulted in its dissolution by the allied forces of Britain, Italy, France and Greece, which occupied different regions of the Empire. Mustafa Kemal Ataturk reunited the Muslim forces and battled the War of Independence (1919–1923) to liberate Turkish territories from these foreign invaders. The battle proved successful and this culminated in the formation of a new assembly in Ankara by Ataturk named Grand National Assembly. This was also followed by the establishment of the Republican People's Party. After the victory, Ataturk abolished Ottoman rule and declared the Turkish Republic in 1923. From this time onwards, Turkey became a secular nation-state.¹⁰³

Mustafa Kemal, the president of the new Turkish Republic, was of the view that "Turkey could only be rebuilt and take its place in the civilized world through rapid modernization, and modernization meant Westernization which in turn meant complete secularization."¹⁰⁴ Islam came to be portrayed as backward, regressive, and responsible for Turkey's decline. Consequently, efforts were made to replace Islam with Western civilisation and nationalism in every sphere of life. The Sultanate, Caliphate, *shari'ah* courts, the office of Sheikh ul Islam—the highest religious authority in the Ottoman Empire—and madrasahs were abolished. The law unifying all educational institutions under a single government department was also enacted. Following the rebellion that emerged in response to the new government's Westernising policies, a law was passed in 1925 to shut down all dervish lodges and Sufi gathering centres. The Sufi orders were dissolved, and the shrines and tombs of saints were likewise sealed. Mustafa Kemal also compelled people to adopt Western-style

¹⁰² Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 193–94.

¹⁰³ For details, see *ibid.*, 133–36; Lewis, *The Emergence*, 239–60; Berkes, *Development of Secularism*, 435–56; Zurcher, *Turkey*, 151–68.

¹⁰⁴ Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 189. See also Berkes, *Development of Secularism*, 463–64.

dress, including European hats. In 1926, the Swiss civil code and Italian criminal law were adopted.¹⁰⁵

Witch hunts for religious minds became common; scores of people who plotted against the regime were put to death. In 1926, the Western Gregorian calendar and 24-hour clocks were introduced. In 1928, the Constitution was amended to banish Islam as a state religion, writing script was changed from Arabic to the Latin alphabet, and the Turkish language was ‘purged’ of Arabic and Persian words. According to Vahide, “A more effective way of cutting off an entire nation from its religion, its roots, and its past could not have been devised.”¹⁰⁶ But the step that created most public fury was the conversion of the *adhan* (call for prayer) from Arabic to Turkish in 1932.¹⁰⁷

In 1931, Kemal’s Republican People’s Party merged with the state, making the country a single-party state. Kemalist principles¹⁰⁸ were not only incorporated in the constitution but also disseminated at grass-root level through educational institutes. Secularism, nationalism and Western culture were propagated with great zeal.¹⁰⁹ This totalitarian regime caused discontent and resentment among people. Mustafa Kemal failed to understand that, due to differences between Islam and Catholicism, Western secularism and scientific positivism at the expense of religion did not fit with Turkish society.¹¹⁰ In such unfavourable conditions, the *Risale* helped Turkish Muslims to stay connected with their religious ties. Amid such circumstances, Nursi was exiled to Barla in 1925.¹¹¹ There he started writing the *Risale*. In Barla, Nursi’s first treatise, which he termed the Tenth Word (tenth chapter of first volume of the *Risale*), was on life after death. The Tenth Word was inspired by a Qur’anic verse dealing with this subject:

فَانظُرْ إِلَى آثَارِ رَحْمَتِ اللَّهِ كَيْفَ يُحْيِي الْأَرْضَ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَا إِنَّ ذَلِكَ لَمُحْيِي الْمَوْتَى وَهُوَ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ

So think on the signs of God’s mercy, how He gives life to the earth after its death; indeed, He it is who will give life to the dead, and He is powerful over all things.¹¹²

The treatise was printed and sent to government officials in Ankara. Around the same time, the Council of Education was about to inculcate ideas denying bodily resurrection. The officials thought Nursi was informed of their decision and wrote an article to counteract it. When word reached Nursi, he contended that he had received no such information and the

¹⁰⁵ For details, see Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 190–91; Berkes, *Development of Secularism*, 464–66; Lewis, *The Emergence*, 266–74; Serif Mardin, “Religion and Secularism in Turkey,” in *The Modern Middle East: A Reader*, ed. Albert Hourani, Philips S. Khouri, and Mary C. Wilson (University of California Press, 1993), 364–65.

¹⁰⁶ Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 191.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.; Lewis, *The Emergence*, 414–16; Berkes, *Development of Secularism*, 473–78.

¹⁰⁸ The six principles of Kemalism are republicanism, secularism, nationalism, populism, statism and revolutionism (or reformism). See Zurcher, *Turkey*, 181–82.

¹⁰⁹ Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 192; Zurcher, *Turkey*, 181.

¹¹⁰ Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 192.

¹¹¹ A remote and tiny village of only 15 to 20 houses in the mountains of Isparta Province near the northwestern shore of Lake Egirdir. This place did not have a motor road at that time; the only way to get there was on foot or by horse or donkey. See Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 186.

¹¹² Qur’an 30:50.

treatise was granted to him by Almighty God due to a need. Nursi was right in his perception because due to the education policy of the new Republic, religious beliefs were not only under attack in educational institutes but many media types were being used to attack beliefs and institutions, missing no chance to ridicule them. In these conditions and circumstances, Nursi claimed the treatise of the Hereafter explained the truths about resurrection to ordinary people even to children for which even such a luminary as Ibn e Sina (Avicenna) failed to provide a rationale and said “resurrection cannot be understood by rational criteria.”¹¹³

Despite its hostile measures ranging from imprisonment to exiles, the secular regime could not completely keep Nursi’s writings from reaching members of the public. The *Risale* attempted to answer all questions that created doubts and confusions in the minds of the believers. It was a fitting reply to the radical positivist modernisation of the age. As Ozervarli comments:

Nursi’s writings quickly grew into encyclopaedic volumes and were re-copied to be distributed piece-by-piece in each small town of the country. Besides, through personal letters, Nursi continued to contact his students, who spread those writings in diverse parts of the country, and in some cases, abroad. The entire collection of *Risale-i Nur* was believed by his community to be in accordance with the expectations of modern man, who, whether Muslim or not, had been deeply imbued by materialist philosophy. They were regarded as answers to all questions, doubts and confusions that contemporary believers faced. In other words, they were read as explanations to the entire ‘why’s’ which hovered above the questioning mind of educated people, at the brink of losing connection with their religious culture. Therefore, in this aspect, the aim of Nursi’s social movement was to create a public awareness and a religious self-consciousness against the radical type of positivist modernisation.¹¹⁴

As mentioned above, Nursi’s higher ambition was saviour of belief; it can be well observed that the Qur’anic verses interpreted in the *Risale* are mostly related to truths of belief. Thus, Nursi fulfilled the task of revitalisation of belief by writing the *Risale* and secured the belief of the Turkish people. The *Risale* also ventured to the revival of those areas of decline that Nursi identified in the early phase of his life, which he had intended to revive through political and educational means. His treatises first drew the attention of local people, attracting villagers including the young, old, women, and children. The number of his students and followers grew so rapidly that in the 1940s, it reached 500,000 according to an estimate. At the time of his death in 1960, he had around one million followers, according to the *New York Times* (24 March 1960).¹¹⁵ Owing to this service, he was given the title of centennial revivalist (*mujaddid*)¹¹⁶ of the 20th century in the region of Turkey.

¹¹³ Nursi, *The Words*, 106.

¹¹⁴ Ozervarli, “The Reconstruction,” 540–41.

¹¹⁵ Cited in Saritoprak, “Islam and Politics,” 118.

¹¹⁶ For discussions identifying Bediuzzaman Said Nursi as a *mujaddid* (revivalist), see: Algar, “Centennial Renewer”; Oliver Leaman, “Nursi’s Place in the Ihya’ Tradition,” *The Muslim World* 89 (1999).

CONCLUSION

This study examined the causes of Muslim decline in the 20th century as identified by Bediuzzaman Said Nursi and his strategy for addressing them. It found that Nursi lived in a period marked by the spread of atheistic and anti-religious ideologies, particularly in Turkey, which challenged the centrality of faith in Muslim society. While various responses emerged, including secularism, nationalism, and Islamism, Nursi developed a distinct approach grounded in Qur'anic principles.

He identified key factors behind the Muslim decline, including weaknesses in education, political instability, scientific backwardness, and neglect of the fundamentals of Islam. His approach evolved over time—from an early emphasis on institutional and political reform to a later focus on faith-based revival. While he initially saw modern science as a means to strengthen belief, he later emphasised the need to counter its materialist interpretations and affirmed its compatibility with the Qur'an. He also explored Sufism but ultimately regarded it as insufficient to address the intellectual challenges of the modern age.

Nursi turned to the Qur'an as his primary guide, advocating renewal of faith through investigation rather than imitation. His dynamic and context-sensitive methodology enabled him to respond effectively to the challenges of his time and contributed to the preservation and revitalisation of Muslim belief in the face of modern ideological pressures.

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