

Turkey's Transition into Modernity and the Response of the 'Ulamā': The Case of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi

BADRANE BENLAHCENE*

Abstract

Turkey's transition into modernity is one of the earliest models of modernization in the Muslim world. A complex and controversial process involved significant changes to the country's political, social, and cultural institutions. Accordingly, Muslim intellectuals responded to the challenges posed by this transition process that endangered the country's Islamic identity. This paper analyses the historical overview of Turkey's modernization process, highlighting the key events, institutions, and actors that played a role in shaping the country's development on one hand. On the other hand, it explores the response of the 'ulamā' to the modernization process, with a special emphasis on the contributions of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi. It analysed his activist and intellectual struggle to meet the challenges of the modernization process, his criticisms of the secularist approach to modernization, and his efforts to develop an Islamic political theory that provided answers to the new situation.

Keywords

Turkey, modernity, transition, Nursi, four pillars.

Introduction

Turkey has a long and rich history of modernization, dating back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when the Ottoman Empire underwent significant changes in response to internal and external pressures. As one of the earliest models of modernization in the Muslim world, Turkey's transition into modernity was a complex and controversial process that involved significant changes to the country's political, social, and cultural institutions.

One of the most important issues regarding Turkey's modernization is defining the relationship between religion and secularism. On one

* Research Associate Professor, Ibn Khaldon Center for Humanities and Social Sciences, Qatar University, Doha, Qatar.

hand, a considerable number of Turkish intellectuals and elites saw the adoption of Western-style secularism as an essential step in the country's modernization, arguing that it would help to separate religion from the state and promote religious tolerance and diversity. On the other hand, many Muslim intellectuals criticized this approach, arguing that it would undermine the role of religion in Turkish society and erode the country's Islamic identity.

One of the most prominent Muslim intellectuals to engage in this debate was Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1877-1960), a prominent Islamic scholar and spiritual leader who was active during the early twentieth century. Nursi saw the secular modernization of Turkey as a threat to the country's Islamic identity and sought to develop a more inclusive and holistic approach to face the current situation and empower his fellow Muslims in the face of modernity. In his writings and teachings, Nursi argued that Islam is not inherently incompatible with modern developments, but rather it could provide a framework that would preserve the role of religion in Turkish society while also promoting social and political progress.

This paper does not assert originality in its subject matter, as there is a considerable body of literature concerning modernization in Turkey and extensive research on Nursi, encompassing both his activist and intellectual endeavours. However, this paper takes a distinctive approach by examining modernity in Turkey as a dynamic historical process, underscoring its role in the transition from the Ottoman Caliphate to the republican era. This transformative process was far from unopposed and unchallenged; notably, it encountered significant resistance and criticism, chiefly from the *'ulamā'* who represented the forefront of the Ottoman intelligentsia. In this context, the primary focus of this paper centres on the response articulated by Nursi. The paper relies on the available material written about modernity in Turkey as well as the writings by and about Nursi.

Turkey's Transition into Modernity

The legacy of the Ottoman Empire after the seventeenth century onward always seemed to fall back on the memory of its power and position it held in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Looking into the past for solutions aimed at preserving the empire's power had only created a slough in its development. Ottoman reformers until the eighteenth century were caught in this limbo of reiterating past values and ideas until the reign of Sultan Selim III (r. 1789-1807).

Sultan Selim III's endeavours towards reform, intertwined with similar efforts made by Mahmud II (r. 1808-1839), albeit largely met with

limited success, initiated a sequence of reformative actions that would trigger a cascading effect, as elaborated in the ensuing sections.

The Tanzimat Period (1839-1876)

By 1839, under the rule of Selim and Mahmud, major changes brought about to the Ottoman Empire; the destruction of the Janissaries,¹ the centralization of military command and power to the sultan, the acceptance of foreign military assistance, more specifically the aid of the British military against the internal opposition forces of Mehmed Ali Pasha in 1838. In addition, the enactment of the *Hatt-ı Şerif Gülhane* decree in 1839, which for the first time declared that all subjects of the empire were equal regardless of religion, and abolished the tax farming and punishment without trial.²

During this historical period, new administration reforms that took the name of *Tanzimat*, which literally means “reordering,” emerged and marked a new era in Turkish modern history.³ The term *Tanzimat* refers to the systematic and consistent reforms carried out by the Ottoman administration. These reforms were primarily led by three statesmen: Mustafa Reşid Pasha, Mehmed Emin Âlî Pasha, and Keçecizâde Mehmed Fu'ad Pasha. Together they steered the transformative reforms and formed the central administrative bureaucracy (known as Sublime Porte or *Bâb-ı Âlî*), mostly independent of the sultan and the 'ulamā' (religious scholars).⁴

The *Tanzimat* period marked a significant turning point in the history of the Ottoman Empire and had a profound impact on the development of modern Turkey. The reforms were driven by a desire to modernize the empire and catch up with the West and were aimed at creating a more efficient and centralized government, modernizing the military, and promoting equality and security for all Ottoman citizens. One of the key objectives of the *Tanzimat* reforms was to modernize the

¹ A military infantry unit credited with the ascent of the Ottoman Empire's power starting from the fourteenth century CE onwards. It persisted in control and power up until 1826 under Mahmud II who ordered their destruction. Suraiya Faroqhi, *The Cambridge History of Turkey: Later Ottoman Empire, 1603-1839* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3:60; Gilles Veinstein, “On the Ottoman Janissaries (Fourteenth-Nineteenth Centuries),” in *Fighting for a Living: A Comparative Study of Military Labour 1500-2000*, ed. Erik-Jan Zürcher (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 115-118, accessed February 16, 2023, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/j.ctt6wp6pg.7>.

² Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (London: Oxford University Press, 2001), 107.

³ Reşat Kasaba, *The Cambridge History of Turkey: Turkey in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 4:13.

⁴ Şükrü M. Hanioglu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 73.

administrative structure of the empire and create a more centralized and efficient government. To achieve this goal, the Ottoman government introduced a series of administrative reforms that aimed to streamline the bureaucracy and reduce corruption. This included the creation of new administrative divisions and the appointment of educated bureaucrats to key positions in the government.⁵

In addition to administrative reforms, the Ottoman government also undertook a series of military reforms during the *Tanzimat* period. The reforms aimed to modernize the Ottoman military and improve its ability to defend the empire against external threats. This included the introduction of new weaponry and tactics, the reorganization of the army, and providing modern military training for the officers.⁶

Another important aspect of the *Tanzimat* reforms was the introduction of legal reforms aimed at promoting equality and security for all Ottoman citizens. This included the abolition of the millet system, which granted different religious and ethnic groups of the Ottoman subjects a separate legal status. However, with *Tanzimat* there was an aim to transform Ottoman “subjects” into “citizens.” The case led, under the influence of the modern nation-state notion, to the introduction of a new legal code based on citizenship.⁷

However, the *Tanzimat* era set to establish a break from traditional Ottoman and Islamic precepts of ruling and instead aimed at aligning itself to the larger part of European ideals of universalism, nationalism and secularity.⁸ In the legal arena, a renewed Council of Judicial Ordinances (*Meclis-i Ahkam-i Adliye*) under the Imperial Rescript Edict (*Hatt-i Serif* or *Hatt-i Humayun*) in 1840 was put in place. Although the council did not seek to uproot Islamic legal rulings (*Şeriat*) from the legal system, the subsequent penal codes were heavily influenced by French law. Similarly, new commercial laws were put in place based on French

⁵ Renée Worringer, “Sick Man of Europe or Japan of the Near East? Constructing Ottoman Modernity in the Hamidian and Young Turk Erash,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 36, no. 2 (2004): 207-30, accessed February 16, 2023, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3880032>.

⁶ Vedit İnal, “The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Ottoman Attempts to Catch Up with Europe,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 47, no. 5 (2011): 725-56, accessed February 10, 2023, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/23054261>.

⁷ Wajih Kawtharānī, “al-Tanzīmāt al-‘Uthmāniyyah wa ’l-Dastūr: Bawākīr al-Fikr al-Dastūrī Naşşan wa Taṭbīqan wa Mafhūman,” *Tabayyun* 1, no. 3 (2013): 7, accessed August 22, 2023, https://tabayyun.dohainstitute.org/ar/issue003/Pages/Tabayun03-2013_wajih%20kawtharani.pdf; Wajih Kawtharani, “The Ottoman Tanzimat and the Constitution,” *AlMuntaqa* 1, no. 1 (2018): 51, accessed August 22, 2023, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep12682>.

⁸ Hanioglu, *Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, 74.

models.⁹ In finance, banks followed European standards and mimicked their tools. Turkish paper currency was circulated but, contrarily, gold and silver coinage were removed in 1840.¹⁰ In education, administrative officials with judicial and military expertise were deployed to innovate the education system in the empire. In 1847, the Ministry of Education was set up to oversee the establishment of schools with secular curricula unlike the previous educational system, which was set up by the 'ulamā' using religion as its foundation.¹¹

The other crucial and radical changes during this period were the Imperial Rescript (*Islahat Fermanı*) of 1856, the adoption of French commercial and maritime codes in 1861 and 1863 respectively, the legal reform of 1868 setting up Divan of Judicial Ordinances (*Divan-i Ahkam-i Adliye*) and a Council of State (*Şura-yi Devlet*), the counterpart of the French Conseil d'Etat, the educational reform of 1868 promoting the use of French instruction and Western curriculum and the legal reform (1870-76) known as *Mecelle*.¹²

The rationale behind these reforms, however, was a genuine desire to make the administration of the empire more efficient by adopting Western methods and institutions and a desire to earn a place alongside European powers by bringing about reforms on European lines and thereby reducing the constant pressure exerted upon the empire.¹³ *Tanzimat* constituted a modernization endeavour propelled by a top-down approach that was also influenced by external factors. It emerged as the brainchild of a relatively compact, yet highly influential faction within the imperial bureaucratic elite. The trajectory and timing of *Tanzimat* were indisputably moulded by the weight of foreign diplomatic pressures.¹⁴

Accordingly, the *Tanzimat* period marked a significant turning point in the history of the Ottoman Empire and had a lasting impact on the development of modern Turkey. *Tanzimat* laid the foundation for the modernization of the empire and helped to create a more centralized, efficient, and inclusive government. However, the reforms also sparked

⁹ Ibid., 110.

¹⁰ Lewis, *Emergence of Modern Turkey*, 111.

¹¹ Ibid., 114.

¹² Ibid., 122.

¹³ Erik Jan Zürcher, *The Unionist Factor: The Rôle of the Committee of Union and Progress in the Turkish National Movement 1905-1926* (Leiden: Brill, 1984), 1.

¹⁴ Milen V. Petrov, "Everyday Forms of Compliance: Subaltern Commentaries on Ottoman Reform, 1864-1868," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 46, no. 4 (2004): 730-59, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3879508>.

resistance and controversy, as many Ottoman citizens were resistant to change and opposed to the zeal of Westernization.¹⁵

During the reform period, the independent role of the *'ulamā'* weakened and the *waqf* (endowment), which provided *'ulamā'* with financial independence, was aggravated. Therefore, the *'ulamā'* lost their autonomy from state control, their role was marginalized, and only the opinions which were in line with what the state had asked for or requested were entertained. Hence, power moved from the palace to the new imperial bureaucracy by 1876.¹⁶

Despite these controversies, the *Tanzimat* period remains an important chapter in the history of modern Turkey and a testament to the country's early transition to modernity.

The Reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II (r. 1876–1909)

Sultan Abdulhamid II was the 34th sultan of the Ottoman Empire, who ruled from 1876 to 1909. He ruled during a time of political upheaval and modernization efforts in the Ottoman Empire. For example, the year 1876 witnessed the death of two sultans, Sultan Abdulaziz (r. 1861-1876) and Sultan Murad V, in months.¹⁷

The international geopolitical conditions for the Ottoman Empire in 1876 were tense primarily for two reasons: tensions between Britain and Russia fighting over Ottoman territory along with Europe's added pressure on the Ottomans to modernize. The Ottoman Empire in the meanwhile witnessed its first constitutional era (1876-1878).¹⁸ It was, however, rejected by European authorities after the conference and by the sultan who refused to accept the limitations which the constitution imposed on his power. It was not until 1909 that the constitution became meaningful.¹⁹ The tensions eventually led to the Russo-Ottoman War in 1877, which lasted until 1878 and resulted in the Ottoman Empire losing part of its territories.

On the other hand, the sultan took charge of the empire's internal affairs by limiting the power of the Sublime Porte, which had enjoyed independent bureaucratic power for over three decades.²⁰ Abdülhamid II's reign was the longest in the late Ottoman Era. His vision for the empire was not different from that of the *Tanzimat* reforms. He continued to introduce changes in administration, justice, and,

¹⁵ İnal, *Ottoman Attempts*, 725-56.

¹⁶ Hanioglu, *Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, 73.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 123.

substantially, in education and communication. He enlarged the *Mülkiye* (Civil Service Academy) and Harbiye (War Academy) and constructed eighteen new professional colleges before the end of the century.²¹

One of Abdulhamid's key reforms was the introduction of a modern educational system. He established a network of schools and universities throughout the empire and encouraged the education of women and minorities. This helped to improve literacy rates and increase access to education for all Ottoman citizens. He also set up more schools based on European curricula and staffed with teachers having modern Western-type educational backgrounds.

Furthermore, the Civil Service Academy or *Mülkiye Mektebi*, which had been established in 1859 to train the new cadres needed by the administration during the *Tanzimat*, was expanded under Sultan Abdulhamid in 1877. The curriculum at the academy included translation, French language, composition, geography, ethnography, statistics, economics, financial organization and bookkeeping, administration, commercial law, international law, income and taxes, the Ottoman constitution, industrial and commercial geography, and civil law.²²

Consequently, the number of graduates increased, allowing for the opening of the University of Istanbul in 1900. Pupils increasingly came from the lower strata of the population and for the first time, the Western influence reached people outside the ruling elites. Ideas of constitutional freedom, patriotism, and parliamentary rule were, thus, transmitted to new generations at the professional training colleges in the capital. With such reforms continuing even after the collapse of the Sublime Porte, it seems conclusive that the major difference between the *Tanzimat* period and the reign of Abdulhamid II was that the Porte was replaced as the centre of power by the palace, with the sultan himself very much in control.

The Young Ottoman Movement

The Young Ottoman Movement was a late-nineteenth-century political and intellectual organization. The movement was made up of young Ottoman intellectuals and military officers who were critical of the traditional Ottoman political and social structures and sought to create a constitutional monarchy in the empire. It was an opposition that arose due to the dissatisfaction with the actions of statesmen like Mustafa Reşid Pasha, Mehmed Emin Âlî Pasha and Keçecizâde Mehmed Fu'ad Pasha. Turkish intellectuals such as Ibrahim Sinai (1826-1871), Ziya Pasha

²¹ Zürcher, *Unionist Factor*, 2.

²² *Ibid.*, 12.

(1825-1880), Namık Kemal (1840-1888) and Ali Suavi (d. 1878), although inspired by liberal ideas of the *Tanzimat*, began to criticize the authoritarian character of the *Tanzimat* policies as well as their superficiality. They recognized the European hegemony in the *Tanzimat* policies and reforms and pushed for an innovative approach to create a symbiosis between the principles of Islam and the ideas of the European Enlightenment. The *Tanzimat* reformers were separated from the ideology of the empire's subjects in a way that was unprecedented in Ottoman history and the Young Ottoman Movement sought to correct the severe misalignment.²³

The Young Ottoman Movement saw its beginning at a picnic attended by six young men whose background in Islamic studies and exposure to the Translation Bureau of the Porte gave an added advantage of possessing knowledge of insider information and of monitoring the European-inspired sources of reform in the Ottoman Empire.²⁴

They were to be considered the second generation of *Tanzimat* reformers of the 1850s and 1860s who nevertheless came under the influence of the European currents of thought of their time i.e., nationalism and liberalism, both of which were ideas foreign to the Ottoman political thought. They criticized the intrusion of European powers in the Ottoman Empire's internal affairs, urged for war against Greece to keep the territory, and voiced out against the double standards of the Imperial Rescript (*Islahat Fermanı*) of 1856 against Muslims.²⁵

To achieve their goals, the Young Ottomans formed secret societies and organized political and intellectual circles. They also published newspapers and journals, in which they expressed their views and criticisms of the Ottoman government. The Young Ottomans were critical of the authoritarian rule of Sultan Abdulhamid II and sought to limit his power and establish a constitutional monarchy. They had been active as a coherent group from 1865 to 1871 after which their influence and power dwindled. However, their importance as an ideological movement was far greater than the political one. They had introduced the ideas of liberalism and nationalism among the Ottoman Muslims and tried to reconcile them with Islam, thus, making these ideas acceptable to Muslims at large. These ideas and the concrete demands, which were

²³ Şerif Mardin, *Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), 4-5; Christiane Czygan, "Reflections on Justice: A Young Ottoman View of the *Tanzimât*," *Middle Eastern Studies* 46, no. 6 (2010): 943-56, accessed December 15, 2022, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27920329>.

²⁴ Mardin, *Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought*, 12.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 169.

based on constitutional and parliamentary government, were adopted later on by the groups that opposed the autocracy in the Ottoman Empire in 1876, 1878, 1889, and, again in, 1905.²⁶

Despite their significant contributions to the Ottoman Empire and the development of modern Turkey, the Young Ottomans faced opposition and repression from the Ottoman government. Many members of the movement were arrested and imprisoned, and their political and intellectual activities were suppressed. In an attempt to silence the growing movement, the Porte exiled its key members, and their activities ended by 1877.²⁷

Some European ideas and movements, such as the French Revolution and the European Enlightenment, influenced the Young Ottomans. They believed that the Ottoman Empire needed to adopt the principles of liberty, equality, and democracy to modernize and remain competitive in an increasingly globalized world. They also believed that the Ottoman Empire needed to adopt a more secular and rational approach to governance and to separate religion from the state.²⁸

The Young Ottoman Movement was an important precursor to the modern Turkish Republic. It marked the beginning of a political and intellectual awakening in the Ottoman Empire and helped to lay the groundwork for the establishment of a secular, democratic, and modern nation state in Turkey. The movement also helped to shape the intellectual and political discourse of the Ottoman Empire and influenced the development of modern Turkey in the twentieth century. The ideas and ideals of the Young Ottoman Movement continue to shape the political and intellectual discourse of Turkey today and are considered an important part of the country's modern history.

The Young Turks and the 1908 Constitutional Revolution

The Young Turks and the 1908 Constitutional Revolution were important events in the late Ottoman Empire, which marked a turning point in the country's modern history. The Young Turks were a political movement that sought constitutional reforms and aimed to establish a constitutional monarchy in the Ottoman Empire. They were critical of the rule of Sultan Abdulhamid II and sought to limit his power.

²⁶ Czygan, *Reflections on Justice*, 943-56.

²⁷ Murat C. Mengüç, "Young Ottomans," in *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World*, ed. Richard C. Martin (New York: Thomson Gale, 2004), 737-39.

²⁸ Ersel Aydınli, "The Turkish Pendulum between Globalization and Security: From the Late Ottoman Era," *Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 3 (2004): 102-33, accessed February 17, 2023, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4289914>.

The Young Turks Movement saw its beginnings in the 1880s because of Sultan Abdulhamid's increased focus on educational reforms. Strong opinions began to grow among college students against the sultan's regime, in the coincidence of the murder of Mithat Pasha, who put together the constitution in 1885, and the loss of Cyprus and Egypt to the British occupation. The movement initially began in the lower middle class and new professional classes. However, several conflicting reports about the origins of the Young Turks still exist.²⁹ The Young Turks were never really a unified front. They were instead composed of various subgroups of movements who differed in their ideas about the ideal governance the Ottoman Empire needed. Zürcher sheds some light on the organization of these subgroups under the Young Turks umbrella. He states that four subgroups existed: the founders, the members of what came to be known as the Ottoman Committee (or Society) for Union and Progress, the leaders of the 1908 Constitutional Revolution, and some politically active military leaders of the army.³⁰

Ahmet Rıza—a former director of the education department in Bursa, Turkey and the son of a member of the first Ottoman parliament—aspired to dominate the opposition movement and did so for nearly twenty years. In 1895, he collaborated with Halil Ganem to publish a new fortnightly journal, *The Meşveret* (Consultation) in Turkish and French. The French Revolution inspired his ideas, especially after he visited Paris during its centenary celebrations. Since then, Ahmet Rıza's affinity to positivism reflected in his writings. The Young Turks looked at science as their saviour in helping the empire's transition into modernity. The journal followed the motto *İntizam ve Terakki* (Order and Progress) and functioned as the official organ of the opposition movement which he ran as president in 1895. The movement grew under his leadership and took another name the Ottoman Committee (or Society) for Union and Progress (CUP). The CUP gained traction among the civil servants and the army leading to a *coup d'état* in August 1896. The coup, however, was betrayed on the eve of its execution and the resistance was again carried on outside of the Ottoman Empire for the following decade since most members were either subjected to internal exile or left for Europe. The movement, however, did not cease. The opposition regrouped and rebranded themselves as the New Young Turks.³¹

In its preparation for the revolution of 1908, the former underground movement strengthened its hold during 1905-1907. Despite Ahmet Rıza's influence and support in 1907, an autonomous

²⁹ Zürcher, *Unionist Factor*, 95.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 96.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 97-98.

underground movement had developed which was in no way controlled by the Turkish opposition abroad. Eventually, it was set up to bring about the restoration of parliamentary and constitutional government in the revolution of 1908, thereby realizing the ideals for which first the Young Ottomans and later the various Young Turk groups had fought for the past half-century.³²

This movement, which had its centre of gravity in the third army, was prepared to use force against the sultan's government to achieve its ends. Consequently, the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 overtook the Hamidian regime, promising liberty, equality, fraternity and justice for the Ottoman subjects with the help of the army. It is worth noting that there was a change in the ideology within the Young Turk Movement since 1902. CPU's initial focus on scientific dogma and enlightenment changed later, as the CPU depended less on science for answers and, instead, leveraged political themes and sentiments of the fatherland i.e., the land under the Ottoman Empire. For instance, before the revolution, the Young Turks' sense of belonging was based on the Darwinist idea of patriotism, which, like Ceylon ducks, needed to be constantly reiterated to establish strong sentiments amongst the public. Either way, the CPU, upon successfully overthrowing the Hamidian regime, in its move as a political body, reinstated the drastic shift in the concept of citizenship which was suspended in 1878.³³

Enver Bey, one of the revolutionist leaders, exclaimed that arbitrary government had disappeared under the Young Turks and "Henceforth, we are all brothers. There are no longer Bulgars, Greeks, Romans, Jews, and Muslims; under the same blue sky we are all equal."³⁴ The period under the Young Turks is referred to as the second constitutional period, which spanned from 1908-18³⁵ and was marked by a transition in governing ideology, from creating a scientific state and order to a purely political party seeking to simply transform the empire into a modern political entity based on ideas of nationalism.³⁶

Ataturkism: Paradigm Shift from Caliphate to Secular Turkey

Ataturkism refers to the political and social reforms introduced by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic of Turkey. It

³² W. Miller, *The Ottoman Empire and Its Successors, 1801-1927* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 474; Feroz Ahmad, "The Young Turk Revolution 1908," *The Middle East Journal of Contemporary History* 3, no. 3 (1968): 19-36.

³³ Hanioglu, *Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, 289-91.

³⁴ Miller, *Ottoman Empire and Its Successors*, 476.

³⁵ Zürcher, *Unionist Factor*, 143.

³⁶ Hanioglu, *Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, 94.

emphasized secularism, nationalism, and modernity, and aimed to create a secular Turkish state free from the influence of religion in the political sphere. This marked a dramatic shift from the Ottoman Empire and its Caliphate system of governance. Atatürk, a man who effectively changed the course of the Ottoman Empire's transition into modern Turkey, joined the army in 1905, only three years before the Young Turk revolution, as a staff office captain.³⁷ After the victory of the CUP in 1908, it pushed military officers into power positions, including Atatürk.

Atatürk observed that although the Young Turks traced their political ideology to the Young Ottomans, they were at odds on many issues, especially the incompatibility between the representative government deriving from the Eurocentric political system and the Islamic political ideals. The Young Turks realized that they could not bridge the gap between these two political ideals due to core internal contradictions. Atatürk then concluded that the only way for a failed empire to realize its nationhood was to be separated from the ideals of the Islamic political system.³⁸ Accordingly, he worked to raise Turkish nationalist sentiments by bolstering the importance of service to the military among the public. However, it was not until 1915 that Atatürk was in a position of decision-making as the lieutenant colonel of a division in the army.³⁹ His rise to fame came with the laurels of winning the battles against the Allied expeditionary forces in December of 1915.⁴⁰ His military successes contributed to his growing political power and from then on, he propagated his idea of a Turkish Republic, advocating for the greater autonomy of the army from government control.⁴¹

Atatürk's first attempt at pursuing political power came just two weeks before the Ottoman withdrawal from the First World War. In December of 1918, he found himself in Istanbul with the CPU disbanded and its leaders fled. Several events were to take place which shifted Atatürk's loyalties leading to his resignation and his open participation and leadership in the opposition movement against the imperial government in 1919. Atatürk was successful in organizing an election for the new chamber called the General National Assembly, of which he was the new deputy. The election itself ironically followed Islamic traditions that included the clerics, recitation from the Qur'ān, an imam leading the prayers, Qur'ānic quotations and references made in his address, etc.

³⁷ Ibid., 32; Suna Kili, "Kemalism in Contemporary Turkey," *International Political Science Review* 1, no. 3 (1980): 381-404, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1601123>.

³⁸ Mardin, *Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought*, 374.

³⁹ Hanioğlu, *Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, 38-43.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 77.

⁴¹ Ibid., 46.

This would be a striking contrast to the Westernized modernization that his governance would later bring to Turkey in the years to come. What Atatürk had done was the result of a long process of modernization. The modernization introduced under the Ottomans largely involved the secularization of the regime, the disintegration of the powerful empire, and the shift in the system values from Ottoman caliphate values to nationalistic ones.

The process of modernization and, especially, secularization continued under the republic. Atatürk, however, was not content with merely separating Islam from politics. Instead, he wanted to do more by removing Islam's power base and subordinating it to the state, thereby depriving the old elites of the ability to fight back. He was aware of the dual functions of religion: the private one of giving the intellectual and emotional meaning of life, ethics, eschatology, and the promise of salvation; and the public function of providing a political ideology. He strongly disapproved of the latter, and his solution was to replace the religion of the Ottoman Empire with a modern secular ideology and the values of republican nationalism.⁴²

The Response of the 'Ulamā' to Turkey's Early Transition to Modernity

The above-mentioned elements resulted in tension that shaped the cultural, political, and social development of Turkey and led to reactions from various quarters in the nation. However, the paper focuses on the response of the 'ulamā' in general and that of Nursi in particular.

With the change that the Ottoman Empire witnessed through its transition into modernity, the fabric of the social structure and society also changed significantly. Several dissenting and conflicting voices were bubbling away in the lower strata of society. The group of individuals who were alarmed by the situation of the public during the transition was the religious elites known as the 'ulamā'. The 'ulamā' were taken aback by Atatürk's unforgiving pursuit of secularism and his vision of modern Turkey as a secular republic. Atatürk's move to turn the Islamic Ottoman Empire into a secular Turkish Republic meant Islam would essentially be removed from all political authority. This was cemented by the fact that the sultan could not govern the secular republic.⁴³

The sultan of the Ottoman Empire was not just a ruler or political leader but also a religious leader. The Ottomans viewed themselves as the "heirs to the Islamic Caliphate" and the sultan as the "protector of

⁴² Richard L. Tapper, *Islam in Modern Turkey: Religion, Politics, and Literature in a Secular State* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1984), 5.

⁴³ Mardin, *Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought*, 191.

the entire Muslim World.”⁴⁴ The ‘*ulamā*’ too were necessitated to partake in state policymaking as advisors to the sultan. In addition to that, the ‘*ulamā*’ had previously been in charge of the education system, the judiciary, and state administration, and took up state envoy positions.⁴⁵ Thus, undoubtedly, the ‘*ulamā*’ would have had a strong voice against Atatürk’s vision, which aimed at uprooting their entire political and religious structure. Some of the ‘*ulamā*’ reasoned that the decline of the Ottoman Empire and its leadership by Atatürk was a manifestation of their undoing.

There emerged, however, two groups within the ‘*ulamā*’ class: Anti-Unionist and Pro-Unionist. The former was banished in 1913, while the latter was marginalized and effectively stripped of importance. Pro-Unionist ‘*ulamā*’ quickly shifted loyalties at the end of the First World War in hopes of re-establishing an Islamic state.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, with the rise of Atatürk and the formation of the Turkish Republic in 1924, the ‘*ulamā*’ were sceptical of their hopes.

The intellectual activity of the ‘*ulamā*’ during these transitions remained active as well. The ‘*ulamā*’ such as Ali Vehbi, Said Halim Pasha, Mehmed Âkif, Mustafa Sabri, Musa Kâzım Efendi, and Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, were among those who confronted the aforementioned transitions.

Musa Kâzım Efendi, for example, in response to the trend of separating religion from science, highlighted, like many ‘*ulamā*’ after him, the apparent contradiction between religion and the ideology of modern science, but not with science itself. He opined that Islam does not contradict science and was always in the position of embracing scientific evidence. He advocated for the infusion of Islamic values into scientific endeavours, a vision that sharply contrasted with the bureaucracy’s firm stance on eliminating all religious influence from the public domain.⁴⁷

The Rise of Nursi as an Islamic Activist and Intellectual

Nursi is one of the most prominent Islamic intellectuals of the 20th century in Turkey. He witnessed the transformative events of the empire and the emergence of the Republic of Turkey. The long-complicated modernization process and the social tensions caused by this process in Turkey shaped Nursi’s activist and intellectual contributions. He played

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 193–94.

⁴⁶ A. Bein, *The Ulema, Their Institutions, and Politics in the Late Ottoman Empire (1876-1924)* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2006), 228.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 18.

a significant role in the response of the 'ulamā' to the modernization process and was among the very early 'ulamā' who took a continuing struggle against the schisms caused by the transition into modernity.⁴⁸

However, delving into the life of Nursi within this paper is not a groundbreaking endeavour, as numerous researchers have extensively examined his life, intellectual pursuits, and scholarly endeavours, along with his active opposition to modernization in Turkey during the late Ottoman Empire and the early republican era. Nevertheless, the primary objective of this paper is to contextualize his intellectual contributions within the broader framework of Muslim scholars' reactions to the process of modernization that unfolded in Turkey.

Consequently, this study draws upon existing literature on Nursi, with an emphasis on works that have established a connection between the modernization process and Nursi's resistance to it. Noteworthy among the early studies on Nursi is Şerif Mardin's work, which sheds light on Nursi's educational background, his immersion in Sufi culture, and his intellectual confrontation with the modernization process.⁴⁹ Additionally, İhsān Qāsim al-Şālīḥī, known for translating Nursi's works from Ottoman Turkish to Arabic and penning one of Nursi's biographies, delineated three distinct phases in Nursi's life: Old Said, New Said, and Third Said.⁵⁰

Various scholars have taken different avenues of enquiry into Nursi's legacy, including his Qur'ānic interpretations⁵¹ and his pivotal role in composing his magnum opus *Rasā'il al-Nūr* during the second phase of his life.⁵² Others have undertaken analyses of Nursi's political thought.⁵³

Drawing upon the aforementioned studies and others, this paper endeavours to comprehend Nursi's response to the transition to modernization in Turkey. The study is particularly focused on exploring his activist life, while also unveiling some of his intellectual reactions to the secularization of politics—a consequence of the modernization process. This evolution compelled Nursi to concentrate on certain

⁴⁸ Ibid., 15.

⁴⁹ Şerif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 230.

⁵⁰ İhsān Qāsim al-Şālīḥī, *Badī' al-Zamān Sa'īd al-Nūrsī: Ḥayātuhu wa fikruh* (Istanbul: Sozlar, 1991), 23; Aḥmad Nūrī al-Nu'aymī, *al-Ḥarakāt al-Islāmiyah al-Ḥadīthah fī Turkiyyā* (Amman: Dār al-Bashīr, 1993), 57.

⁵¹ Hakan Çoruh, *Modern Interpretation of the Qur'an: The Contribution of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2019), 22.

⁵² Zeki Sarıtoprak, "Bediuzzaman Said Nursi," in *The Islamic World*, ed. Andrew Rippin (New York: Routledge, 2008), 399.

⁵³ Kamil Fadel and Eren Tatari, "A Political Analysis of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Damascus Sermon," *Humanities and Social Sciences Review* 5, no. 3 (2016): 303–22.

principles that exhibited their potential to facilitate comprehensive political reforms without severing the republic from the foundations of Islam.

Nursi's Activist Response to Turkey's Transition into Modernity

Nursi divided his life into two phases: the “Old Said” between 1873-1920, and the “New Said” between 1920-1949. However, his biographers mention a third period: the “Third Said” between 1949 and 1960.⁵⁴ These phases correspond to the last decades of the Ottoman Caliphate, and the beginning of the era of the Turkish Republic.⁵⁵

These phases express the most important issues that Nursi faced and the continuity of his struggle, as evidenced by the fact that when he re-edited his writings, he included all his writings, whether at the beginning or the end of his life and put them under the name *Rasā'il al-Nūr*.⁵⁶

The Old Said Phase

The Old Said phase begins with his birth up until the year 1920. He earned the title Bediuzzaman (Arabic: *Badī' al-Zamān*) at a young age because of his outstanding intellectual ability and contribution.⁵⁷ Sufi teachings especially the Naqshbandī order (*ṭarīqah*) influenced his early education.⁵⁸ Madrin holds that Nursi was “a product of Naqshibandi activism in Anatolia,”⁵⁹ though, he admits that not all of Nursi's thought can simply be reduced to the Naqshbandī order alone.⁶⁰

After the eruption of the First World War, Russian forces occupied the city of Van. Nursi joined the war against the Russian invasion. He was captured and sent to a Siberian concentration camp where he was detained for two years. He later managed to escape and fled back to Istanbul where he became involved in intellectual debates with other religious scholars; primarily discussing the social and political problems facing Muslims of his time. The main problems he addressed in his works include modernization, Westernization, nationalism, identity, the structure of the state and its relevant institutions, and the development

⁵⁴ Al-Şālihī, *Badī' al-Zamān Sa'īd al-Nūrsī*, 23; al-Nu'aymī, *al-Ḥarakāt al-Islāmiyah al-Ḥadīthah fī Turkiyyā*, 57.

⁵⁵ Çoruh, *Modern Interpretation of the Qur'an*, 22.

⁵⁶ Al-Şālihī, *Badī' al-Zamān Sa'īd al-Nūrsī*, 23; al-Nu'aymī, *al-Ḥarakāt al-Islāmiyah al-Ḥadīthah fī Turkiyyā*, 57.

⁵⁷ Al-Şālihī, *Badī' al-Zamān Sa'īd al-Nūrsī*, 61.

⁵⁸ Tapper, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 133.

⁵⁹ Madrin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 230.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 68.

and progress of the Islamic civilization. To deal with these issues, Nursi engaged in political discussions. His main political ideas of this period were reflected in his major writings before and after the declaration of constitutionalism. He also voiced his political opinions in his defence speech at the Military Court, on March 31, 1911. Then, he was a member of *Dār al-Ḥikmah al-Islāmiyyah*.⁶¹

The radical transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic led Nursi to hold the view that the state was still a vital instrument for the education of people and that an Islamic Turkish state could be established to revive the vanishing religious Islamic consciousness among people. To actualize his educational projects, he moved to the city of Van where he hoped to establish an Islamic University, named *Madrasat al-Zahrā'*.⁶²

The "New Said" Period

The "New Said" period was the most crucial in his life. It began in 1920 and ended in 1949. He continued to write in his eight years of exile in Barla, where he was kept under strict surveillance by authorities. His frequent trials, court hearings, and exile did not prevent him from writing his treatises. They were an interpretation of the Qur'ān geared towards reviving the traditional Islamic ideals in a way that made them appealing to the contemporary Muslim mind. His writings of this period are collectively called *Rasā'il al-Nūr*. He made every effort to disseminate the teachings of *Rasā'il al-Nūr* throughout Turkey.⁶³

This period as opposed to the "Old Said" period witnessed a shift in his priorities. Although he kept himself socially active, he began to realize that education could strengthen people's beliefs and religious consciousness more than any other factor. Therefore, this period was also a response to the "Old Said" by bringing forward newer solutions encapsulated in the *Rasā'il al-Nūr*.

It is important to notice that Nursi never withdrew from social life completely; his solitude was combined with public activism, for he always found time for both. We can observe this clearly in the "New Said" period. He would withdraw to the mountains of Barla for contemplation and worship and yet continue writing books and reading them to the public with his students and other participants to disseminate his ideas. He also encouraged his students to read, suggest edits, and print them to make them available to a wider audience in the hope of enlightening them. Therefore, the only difference between the

⁶¹ Al-Ṣāliḥī, *Badī' al-Zamān Sa'īd al-Nūrsī*, 40.

⁶² Al-Nu'aymī, *al-Ḥarakāt al-Islāmiyah al-Ḥadīthah fī Turkiyyā*, 61.

⁶³ Saritoprak, "Bediuzzaman Said Nursi," 399.

“Old Said” and the “New Said” lies in the approach to the problems not in the ideas.⁶⁴

After establishing a base for himself, and with the emergence of a new political party, which declared that Islamic consciousness should be at the core of Turkish politics, a new period in the life of Nursi emerged, named the “Third Said” (1949-1960).

The “Third Said” Period

The “Third Said” emerged with his direct involvement in politics through a multi-party democracy. He openly expressed his support for Adnan Menderes and steered his students towards aligning with him. He provided detailed explanations for his endorsement on many occasions. He firmly believed that both he and his students should take on the role of guardians and champions of the Democrats to prevent any instances of blasphemy. His rationale was rooted in the concern that without their support, the Democrats might falter, paving the way for the emergence of sacrilegious tendencies.

On the other side, Menderes comprehended the profound importance of *Rasā'il al-Nūr* in addressing the dangers posed by communism, anarchism, and the spread of irreligious ideologies. He actively endeavoured to convince those around him to integrate Nursi's teachings into the curriculum as educational resources within schools. This commitment led Menderes to issue a directive to Tevfik Bey, the deputy of education, to ensure the publication of Nursi's works in this context.

This alignment of perspectives led Nursi to regard Menderes as an authentic adherent of Islam, deeply understanding its intricate essence. Nursi openly acknowledged his significant interest in Menderes and expressed that Menderes occupied a place in his prayers due to this shared commitment.⁶⁵

Despite supporting Menderes' Democratic Party, he criticized them for non-Islamic policies. He wrote “A Guide for Youth” in 1952, which discussed Islamic dress codes for men and women, but it was widely criticized by the authorities for its Islamic content. The guide also rejected the government's policies of Westernization and secularization,

⁶⁴ Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, “Said Nursi is a Treasury Awaiting Discovery,” in *Said Nursi World Conference: The Renewal of Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century and Bediuzzaman Nursi* (Istanbul: Nessel Publishing, 1996), 17.

⁶⁵ Ilimdar Kaya, “Bediuzzaman Said Nursi and Adnan Menderes,” *Yeniasya*, August 24, 2023, accessed August 24, 2023, https://www.yeniasya.com.tr/ilimdar-kaya/bediuzzaman-said-nursi-ve-adnan-menderes_529040.

which caused Nursi to face court hearings and charges by the government, just like during the one-party rule period.⁶⁶

Nursi's Intellectual Response

Nursi's activist response, through his involvement in social, educational, and political life, encapsulates his practical response to modernity and its challenges. However, his intellectual response is no less than the activist one, especially, since he lived at a time when the lifestyle and thought of secularism and materialism were triumphant and the state had become a secular state.⁶⁷

As Turkey underwent a process of modernization spanning the late Ottoman period to the republican era, a noticeable transformation occurred in its perspective. The course of modernization evolved to a degree where the communal and political dimensions of religion were marginalized, heavily influenced by Western philosophical and political ideologies. This evolution reached a point where all Islamic regulations concerning governance, politics, and communal life were invalidated and substituted with secular laws that excluded religious influence from public affairs, relegating it to a personal domain.

Nursi encountered significant obstacles in his endeavours to revive the authenticity of Islamic principles and teachings, especially within the realm of political ideology. These challenges emerged due to the transition from a caliphate to a secular republic, a shift from the essence of the *ummah* to that of the nation state, and a transition from the application of *sharī'ah* law to the adoption of European legal norms.

Despite acknowledging the general state of underdevelopment in the Islamic world, including the final days of the Ottoman Empire, Nursi did not oppose contemporary sciences and methodologies for structuring political life. Nevertheless, he held the view that secularizing life would ultimately erode the fundamental principles of Islam, disrupt the quality of life, and fail to achieve the objectives promoted by reformists and modern thinkers. These efforts often concentrated solely on the material aspect, reducing life to its tangible, technical, and administrative components, while disregarding the spiritual and ethical dimensions.

In response to these transformative shifts instigated by the process of modernization, Nursi recognized the paramount importance of building an intellectual framework capable of countering the wave of

⁶⁶ Al-Ṣāliḥī, *Badī' al-Zamān Sa'īd al-Nūrsī*, 40-42.

⁶⁷ Maulana Andi Surya, Mhd. Syahminan, and Abrar M. Dawud Faza, "Thought of Kalam Badī' Al-Zamān Sa'id Nursi," *Budapest International Research and Critics Institute-Journal* 5, no. 1 (2022): 4475-86.

secularization. This realization led him to concentrate on delineating strategies for reforming the educational system and initiating the establishment of an education centre or school namely *Madrasat al-Zahrā'*.⁶⁸ Additionally, he directed notable attention towards fortifying the cohesion of the Muslim community, a theme he extensively explored.

Furthermore, he embarked on an exploration of the intricate relationship between religion and science. He asserted that contemporary scientific progress does not inherently contradict religious beliefs, and reciprocally, religion is not in opposition to scientific advancements. However, he identified that conflicts arise between religion and scientism, which represents the ideology that elevates science to an absolute framework.

Nursi also actively involved himself in interpreting the Qur'ān,⁶⁹ restoring its significance and central role. His writings extended to matters of spiritual education, a subject influenced by his upbringing within the Sufi tradition. He firmly believed in the necessity of rectifying the interpretations of the Qur'ān,⁷⁰ especially in his *Ishārāt al-I'jāz*, and purifying souls to establish a profound faith and morals.⁷¹

Consequently, in response to the transformative effects of modernization, Nursi identified the crucial need to establish principles that could facilitate advancement while upholding a harmonious relationship with the nation's identity and religious convictions. Notably, he anticipated that the revitalization of Islam would unfold within the realm of politics. However, witnessing the corruption among politicians and recognizing the inadequacies of their efforts in safeguarding Islam,⁷² Nursi realized the need to approach the issue intellectually. Therefore, he concluded that fundamental principles were necessary to imbue politics with greater intellectual orientation, ensuring its alignment with the service of Islam and the preservation of Islamic identity. As evident from his writings, Nursi's primary emphasis revolved around key principles, notably monotheism (*tawḥīd*), *sharī'ah* (*seriat*), justice (*adalet*), and freedom (*hürriyet*).

⁶⁸ Kasım Karataş, "Educational Philosophy according to Bediuzzaman Said Nursi," *The Journal of Risale-i Nur Studies* 1, no. 1 (2018): 12.

⁶⁹ Çoruh, *Modern Interpretation of the Qur'an*, 52-59.

⁷⁰ Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *The Words* (Istanbul: Sözler Publications, 1998), 767-72.

⁷¹ Sri Indah Mulyantiningsih and Anita Puji Astutik, "The Concept of Faith and Moral in Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Philosophy," *Jurnal Transformatif* 6, no. 1 (2022): 26-28, accessed August 24, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.23971/tf.v6i1.3936>.

⁷² Zeki Saritoprak, "Islam and Politics in the Light of Said Nursi's Writings," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 19, no. 1 (2008): 114, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510340701770337>.

Monotheism constitutes a doctrinal, ethical, legislative, and cultural principle, forms a cosmic perspective, and provides credibility to human beings. It allows harmony and integration in their lives and serves as a source of values and systems for both individuals and societies. Through it, the congruence between humans and existence is ensured. This principle extends its influence to social interactions, politics, and private and public life.

As for the *sharī'ah*, it is a law that does not tolerate distortion. It responds to human aspirations for a dignified life in alignment with the laws of God in existence. It guarantees justice in life and secures freedom for both the individual and the community.

Nursi considers the principles of justice and freedom essential for complementing the fundamental tenets that enable Muslims to counter materialistic and secular ideologies. These principles help surpass internal backwardness. Consequently, Nursi's intellectual and political responses to these challenges hold significant importance for discourse. His Islamic political philosophy is rooted in the principles of *tawhīd* and *sharī'ah* law. He holds that the implementation of the *sharī'ah* in society is essential for achieving equity and freedom for advancing the welfare of both individuals and communities.

Tawhīd

Nursi's writings and teachings placed a significant emphasis on the concept of *tawhīd*. He believed that *tawhīd*, which is the belief in the oneness of God, is the foundation of all Islamic thought and practice. Nursi viewed *tawhīd* not merely as a theological doctrine, but also as a comprehensive worldview that informs every aspect of an individual's life, including social, ethical, and moral dimensions.⁷³ Thus, he did not confine his discussion of *tawhīd* to a theological level but rather emphasized its practical applications in daily life.⁷⁴

According to Nursi, the natural progression towards believing in God entails acquiring knowledge of God, which subsequently fosters a profound love for Him. Essentially, an individual's sense of contentment and elation hinges upon the depth of their understanding of and affection for God, both of which are rooted in their faith. A person possessing God's knowledge and love is poised to find solace amidst life's trials. Conversely, someone devoid of these attributes, despite possessing worldly riches, remains incapable of cultivating inner and outer

⁷³ Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *The Words*, trans. Şükran Vahide (Istanbul: Sözlere Publications, 2008), 27-44.

⁷⁴ Nursi, *The Letters*, trans. Şükran Vahide (Istanbul: Sözlere Publications, 1994), 683.

tranquillity. This is because the absence of faith and knowledge renders them spiritually and physically feeble, exposed, and powerless.⁷⁵

According to Nursi, *tawhīd* entails living a life of moral uprightness, seeking knowledge and wisdom, and engaging in social and political activism to advance justice and freedom. This perspective leads to a state of inner peace as the individual is now able to give meaning to life and events in a way that satisfies the heart and mind.⁷⁶

Tawhīd, as the basis for all religious, ethical, and political beliefs and actions, has profound implications for society and politics and can unite people of diverse backgrounds and beliefs to create a just and equitable society. In this regard, Nursi emphasizes the uniting force of Islam and *tawhīd* against secularized nationalism, saying,

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!⁷⁷

Additionally, he saw *tawhīd* as a way of resisting tyranny and oppression and promoting human dignity and individual rights.⁷⁸ Nursi's emphasis on *tawhīd* highlights the importance of faith in shaping political attitudes and beliefs. He saw it as a way of connecting the spiritual and the political spheres, uniting individuals with the divine, and creating a sense of purpose and meaning in life. Through his teachings, Nursi sought to inspire individuals to act under the principles of *tawhīd*, resist injustice and oppression, and work towards the creation of a more just and equitable society.⁷⁹

Nursi's writings examine the concept of divine unity, the importance of belief in Allah, and the knowledge and love of Allah in a way that resonates with the human intellect and innate nature. He argues that *tawhīd* is not merely an abstract concept but is instead relevant to all aspects of human life. According to Nursi, *tawhīd* has practical implications for society and can promote social cohesion, unity, justice, and fairness. He believes that a society based on *tawhīd* is characterized by equality, compassion, and a commitment to the common good. Nursi's writings on *tawhīd* continue to inspire and

⁷⁵ Nursi and Şükran Vahide, *The Letters* (Istanbul: Sözlür Publications, 2008), 40-42.

⁷⁶ Zuleyha Keskin, "Said Nursi's Tawhīd-Centric Worldview and Inner Peace," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 9, no. 2 (2019): 76, <http://dx.doi.org/10.30845/ijhss.v9n2p11>.

⁷⁷ Nursi, *Letters*, 381-82.

⁷⁸ Nursi and Vahide, *Letters*, 698-99.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 287.

influence Muslims worldwide as a cornerstone of Islamic thought and practice, providing valuable insights into the role that *tawhīd* can play in promoting justice, unity, and compassion in society.⁸⁰

Sharī'ah (Seriat)

Sharī'ah is another central element of Nursi's political thought. For him, *Sharī'ah* represents a comprehensive set of laws and principles that govern all aspects of human life, including politics, economics, and social relationships. He believes that *sharī'ah* should be the foundation of a just and equitable society and that its implementation is essential to bring about the moral and spiritual transformation of individuals and communities. It occupies a considerable place in Nursi's writings. He also expresses his pride in serving the *sharī'ah*. He defines it as "a combination of voluntary actions of human beings to put an order and regularity in their life in relation to the laws of the Divine."⁸¹

Hence, in the realm of politics, the *sharī'ah* represents a comprehensive legal framework that does not endorse the separation of religion from the state. Rather, it encompasses a collection of moral and political principles that extend beyond matters of belief and rituals. Moreover, embracing the *sharī'ah* paves the way for liberation, as it imparts noble objectives through the pursuit of lofty ideals. This encouragement prompts individuals to exert efforts in that direction, dismantling tyrannical rule, igniting noble passions, and eradicating negative emotions like jealousy, envy, malice, and unhealthy competition. The *sharī'ah* is imbued with a genuine awakening, a fervour for healthy competition, a proclivity for innovation, and a predisposition towards advancing civilization.⁸²

In response to the question of the relevance of the *sharī'ah* for the modern age of science, Nursi argues that although the *sharī'ah* is based primarily on divine proofs, it provides a wide space for human reasoning and rationality. He affirms that there is no contradiction between the *sharī'ah* and human rationality. He also states that the *sharī'ah* relates to all social sciences. According to him, the following sciences are included in the *sharī'ah*: *tahdhīb al-rūḥ* (purifying the soul), *tadbīr al-jasad* (governing the body), *tadbīr al-manzil* (management of the household), *al-siyāsah al-madaniyyah* (political science), *nizām al-'ālam* (cosmological

⁸⁰ Ibid., 272.

⁸¹ Badī' al-Zamān Sa'īd al-Nūrsī, *Ishārāt al-Ijāz fī Maḍān al-Ijāz* (Cairo: Sozlar, 1994), 92.

⁸² Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *The Damascus Sermon*, trans. Şükran Vahide (Istanbul: Reyhan, 1996), 36-37.

sciences), *ḥuqūq* (jurisprudence), *al-mu'āmalāt* (sciences of etiquette), and *ādāb ijtimā'iyyah* (societal ethics).⁸³

Since the *sharī'ah* includes the above-mentioned sciences, he argued, it could respond to all kinds of problems and ailing social conditions. Therefore, the *sharī'ah* is a reservoir of all the rules and regulations that human beings and the universe need.⁸⁴

Moreover, Nursi was of the view that separating the *sharī'ah* from social and political life is the first cause of Muslims' decadence. Accordingly, the adversaries are not responsible for Muslims' decline. Rather, their current state of adversity stems from their defiance against the *sharī'ah*, a consequence of ignorance that obstructs Muslims from upholding the divine teachings.⁸⁵

Contrary to the portrayal of the *sharī'ah* as an oppressive doctrine by some Western commentators and their secularized Turkish allies, Nursi sees it as encompassing notions of truth, justice, harmony, virtue, love, attraction, and unity based on religion, country, and class, sincere brotherhood, peace, defensive responses to aggression, mutual assistance, concord, solidarity, guidance, human progress, and spiritual elevation. Therefore, the *sharī'ah* is the cornerstone of a comprehensive political doctrine, grounded in theological and spiritual foundations.⁸⁶

However, to exercise and implement the legal rules of the *sharī'ah* in public domains, there must be complete freedom out of which the said principles can be applied at the political level in general, and at the level of the individual in particular, which brings us to the third pillar.

Freedom (Hürriyet)

Nursi's political philosophy places great emphasis on freedom as one of its key principles. He believed that freedom was essential for the realization of the other pillars of his philosophy. Nursi famously stated "I can live without bread but I cannot live without freedom,"⁸⁷ highlighting the importance he placed on it in his life and philosophy.

According to Nursi, freedom is a divine gift that allows people to practice their religion and follow their beliefs without causing harm to others. He believed that political freedom was crucial for societal

⁸³ Al-Nūrsī, *Ishārāt al-I'jāz*, 116.

⁸⁴ Jamāl 'Ashāq, "Aḍwā' 'alā Ḥarakat al-Nūr fī Turkiyyā," *Majallat al-Ummah* 2, no. 15 (1982): 54.

⁸⁵ Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *The Damascus Sermon*, trans. Şükran Vahide (Istanbul: Sözlere Publications, 2002), 81.

⁸⁶ Fadel and Tatari, "A Political Analysis of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Damascus Sermon," 308.

⁸⁷ Badī' al-Zamān Sa'īd al-Nūrsī, *Şayqal al-Islām* (Istanbul: Sozlar, 1995), 18.

progress and the growth of civilization. Thus, Nursi considered freedom to be a vital aspect of his philosophy, which could enable individuals to achieve self-fulfilment and collective realization while preserving human dignity.⁸⁸

Nursi believed that true freedom meant being able to pursue one's beliefs and contribute to a fair and just society. He viewed limitations on freedom as conflicting with the principles of *tawhīd* and *sharī'ah* and as obstructing personal, communal, spiritual, and moral growth. He saw freedom as a goal that individuals must strive for themselves, rather than waiting for it to be handed to them. He recognized that those who stand to lose from a fair system of freedom will resist its establishment, and therefore people must be prepared to work for it.⁸⁹

He held a strong conviction regarding the significance of freedom and was not hesitant to make clear statements to those who viewed freedom as a means to serve their selfish interests. He even criticized those who failed to recognize freedom as a fundamental right for all members of society. Therefore, he firmly asserted that the Muslim world's prosperity hinges on the principles of freedom and constitutionalism.⁹⁰ In this context, Nursi used the example of constitutionalism, criticizing those who opposed it using any available means to abolish it. Nursi described these individuals as having an immature understanding of freedom and justice, being stubborn and oppressive, denying the rights of others, and acting as despots and opportunists who reject a society based on freedom and justice.⁹¹

Justice (Adalet)

Justice is also one of the key concepts in Nursi's discourse.⁹² He placed great emphasis on its importance in society. He believed that justice is a fundamental principle of Islam and that all individuals, regardless of their social status or wealth, should have access to fair and equal treatment under the law. He saw justice as an essential component of a healthy and functioning society and argued that the *sharī'ah* should be the foundation for ensuring justice in society. Therefore, justice, according to Nursi, played a pivotal role without which all human

⁸⁸ Fadel and Tatari, "A Political Analysis of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Damascus Sermon," 303–22.

⁸⁹ Al-Nu'aymī, *al-Ḥarakāt al-Islāmiyah al-Ḥadīthah fī Turkiyyā*, 63.

⁹⁰ Elmira Akhmetova, "Said Nursi on Secularism, Religious Rights, Ethics, and Education," *ICR Journal* 12, no. 1 (2021): 66, <https://doi.org/10.52282/icr.v12i1.816>.

⁹¹ Badī' al-Zamān Sa'īd al-Nūrsī, *Munāzarāt* (Istanbul: Sozlar, 1977), 10.

⁹² Hasan Horkuc, "Is Justice Binary? Absolute and Relative Justice in the Teachings of Said Nursi," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 38, no. 4 (2010): 584, accessed August 23, 2023, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23677899>.

conduct and affairs would be meaningless and worthless. Nursi states that among the fundamental themes, which the Qur'ān speaks of, is justice.⁹³

Nursi's concept of justice is rooted in Qur'ānic and Islamic principles and teachings. For Nursi, justice was an essential component of the faith and a key component of Islamic political thought. He believes that justice must be established in all aspects of society and that individuals must strive to achieve it in their personal and collective lives. He emphasizes that the Qur'ān lays the foundation for the concept of justice and that one-quarter of the Qur'ān is devoted to justice. In this sense, according to Nursi, justice means to act unconditionally by the commands of Allah, to establish justice for all. Moreover, the Qur'ān and *sunnah* frequently mention the importance of justice in all affairs of humanity, even if it means suppressing desires.⁹⁴

Nursi considers justice as the fundamental element for achieving societal peace and stability. He asserts that justice is the bedrock of the world and the equilibrium of the universe. Additionally, it is the foundation of friendship and the source of love. Nursi argues that justice promotes trust, mutual respect, and cooperation, ultimately leading to the establishment of a harmonious and peaceful society. According to him, enforcing justice is a collective responsibility, particularly for community leaders. He emphasizes the importance of impartiality in administering justice and treating all individuals equally, regardless of their social status. He contends that implementing justice is necessary to safeguard individual and collective rights and prevent the exploitation of the powerless by the powerful. Furthermore, he believes that the feeling of justice and its protection are crucial for both formal and informal institutions of society and the state.⁹⁵

Moreover, Nursi criticized the injustice brought by nationalism in its secularist perspective. In his Letters, Nursi unequivocally asserted that the principles of racism and nationalism stand in direct contradiction to justice and righteousness. He emphasized that these ideologies inevitably lead to oppression against other racial groups. Nursi argued that a leader who adheres to racist ideologies tends to favour those of the same race and becomes incapable of dispensing true justice. Therefore, he strongly cautioned against substituting the bonds of nationalism for the bonds of religion. According to Nursi, such a

⁹³ Al-Nūrī, *Ishārāt al-I'jāz*, 11.

⁹⁴ Al-Nūrī, *al-Khuṭbah al-Jāmi'ah* (Istanbul: Sozlar, 1960), 75-76.

⁹⁵ Nursi and Vahide, *The Letters*, 55-56.

substitution would result in the erosion of justice and the disappearance of what is right.⁹⁶

Consequently, Nursi's concept of justice is a central component of his Islamic political thought and it is rooted in the principles of the faith. He believes that justice is a fundamental and necessary requirement that ensures the stability and peace of society. It leads the way to promote the well-being of individuals and the community as a whole.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research delves into the process of modernization in Turkey since the late Ottoman era, commencing with the reforms of *Tanzimat* and culminating with the secularist elite's transformation of the Ottoman state into the Turkish Republic. This encompassed the adoption of European modernity values, including secularization of the state and exclusion of religion from the public sphere, leading to the emergence of a new materialistic worldview that contrasted with the Ottoman-era worldview.

The long-term shifts that transpired in Turkey triggered changes and tensions within the realms of intellectual, social, religious, and political domains. These transformations were primarily political, and they prompted reactions from scholars, including figures like Nursi.

Nursi's response to the modernization process was twofold. He engaged in reformative activism throughout various stages, encompassing both his earlier and later endeavours. Simultaneously, his intellectual response aimed to present visions for rectifying the religious, scientific, and societal status of Muslims. Within the political sphere, he perceived the need for a theoretical and intellectual framework alongside principles that could aid society in confronting the negative aspects of modernization. He saw how the concept of *tawḥīd* could introduce a worldview that presents Islam as a way of life capable of countering the materialistic underpinnings of secularism. He also recognized the necessity of freedom, a natural and fundamental demand, in countering the oppression of the late Ottoman era and the secular republican rule. Furthermore, the *sharī'ah*, as a system safeguarding both Muslims' and non-Muslims' rights, was a cornerstone of his proposed solution. This emphasis on justice was Nursi's fourth principle, aimed at transcending the injustices and backwardness that marked his contemporary society.

Remarkably, Nursi, particularly through his writings, presented these principles not only to his disciples but also to all Muslims,

⁹⁶ Nursi, *Letters*, 76; Akhmetova, "Said Nursi on Secularism," 65.

irrespective of their capacity to implement them. His messages resonated with the conscience of the Turkish Muslims, regardless of their mindset, as well as with humanity as a whole. Consequently, Nursi's ideas can be regarded as a significant socio-political philosophy to confront the failures of the modernization process not only in Turkey but also in other Islamic countries that share similar cultural belonging and circumstances.

* * *