

Bediuzzaman Said Nursi on Interreligious Dialogue as A Path to Social Renewal Amidst Turkey's Secularization (1920-1949)

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Abstract

This study explores Said Nursi's thoughts on interreligious dialogue as articulated in his monumental work, *Risale-i Nur*, within the socio-political context of Turkey in the 1920s, a period marked by the transition from the Ottoman Caliphate to the secular Republic. Amid tensions between Western modernization and Islamic tradition, Nursi developed a theological and socio-political thoughts that underscored the necessity of interreligious dialogue for the sake of peace, moral integrity, and mutual progress. In particular, *The Words* and *The Letters*, sections within *Risale-i Nur*, reveal Nursi's understanding that interreligious dialogue arises from a faith-based commitment to truth, compassion, and justice. Nursi argues that ethical solidarity among the Abrahamic faiths, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, constitutes a share responsibility before humanity and God. Exploration on interreligious dialogue within historical contexts of Turkey, provides an important contribution to finding a model of interfaith dialogue that resists secularist assumptions and remains profoundly relevant to the pursuit of religious harmony in today's pluralistic world.

Keywords: Interreligious Dialogue,; Bediuzzaman Said Nursi; Religions; Secularization; Modernity

المخلص

تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية أفكار سعيد النورسي حول الحوار بين الأديان، كما عبّر عنها في عمله الرائد "رسائل النور"، وذلك في السياق الاجتماعي والسياسي لتركيا في عشرينيات القرن الماضي، وهي فترة اتسمت بالانتقال من الخلافة العثمانية إلى الجمهورية العلمانية. في خضم التوتر بين التحديث الغربي والتقاليد الإسلامية، طوّر النورسي فكرًا لاهوتيًا واجتماعيًا وسياسيًا أكد على ضرورة الحوار بين الأديان من أجل السلام والنزاهة الأخلاقية والتقدم المشترك. ويكشف كتابا "الكلمات



والحروف"، وهما جزء من "رسائل النور"، عن فهم النورسي بأن الحوار بين الأديان ينبع من التزام إيماني بالحق والرحمة والعدالة. وجادل النورسي بأن التضامن الأخلاقي بين الديانات الإبراهيمية - الإسلام والمسيحية واليهودية - مسؤولية مشتركة أمام البشرية والله. إن استكشاف الحوار بين الأديان في سياق التاريخ التركي يساهم بشكل مهم في إيجاد نموذج للحوار بين الأديان يرفض الافتراضات العلمانية ويظل وثيق الصلة بالسعي إلى تحقيق الانسجام الديني في المجتمع التعددي اليوم

الكلمات المفتاحية: حوار أنتاراغاما; بديع الزمان سعيد النورسي; عجا عجا;
سيكولاريساسي; الحداثة

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji pemikiran Said Nursi tentang dialog antaragama sebagaimana disampaikan dalam karya monumentalnya, *Risale-i Nur*, dalam konteks sosial-politik Turki pada tahun 1920-an, periode yang ditandai oleh transisi dari Kekhalifahan Ottoman ke Republik sekuler. Di tengah ketegangan antara modernisasi Barat dan tradisi Islam, Nursi mengembangkan pemikiran teologis dan sosial-politik yang menggarisbawahi perlunya dialog antaragama demi perdamaian, integritas moral, dan kemajuan bersama. Secara khusus, *The Words and The Letters*, bagian dalam *Risale-i Nur*, mengungkapkan pemahaman Nursi bahwa dialog antaragama muncul dari komitmen iman terhadap kebenaran, kasih sayang, dan keadilan. Nursi berpendapat bahwa solidaritas etis di antara agama-agama Abrahamik—Islam, Kristen, dan Yahudi—merupakan tanggung jawab bersama di hadapan manusia dan Tuhan. Eksplorasi dialog antaragama dalam konteks sejarah Turki memberikan kontribusi penting untuk menemukan model dialog antaragama yang menolak asumsi sekuler dan tetap relevan secara mendalam terhadap upaya mencapai kerukunan umat beragama di masyarakat plural sekarang ini.

Kata Kunci: Dialog Antaragama; Bediuzzaman Said Nursi; Agama-Agama; Sekularisasi; Modernisme

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A. Introduction

A central challenge in promoting interreligious dialogue today lies in both articulating its theological foundations and translating them into concrete practices

within specific social contexts. In this regard, it is insufficient to focus solely on deepening and elaborating the theological basis of such dialogue; equal attention must be given to understanding the socio-historical conditions in which it takes place. Some existing studies privilege a purely theological approach, often neglecting the historical and societal contexts that shape interreligious engagement. A more integrated perspective—one that balances theological reflection with historical and social analysis—allows interreligious dialogue to draw meaningfully from theological insights while remaining responsive to the lived realities of the communities involved.

Throughout history, individuals from diverse religious traditions have actively engaged in these matters, often contributing to the emergence of new dynamics within their respective social contexts. However, many of their contributions remain relatively unknown, resulting in limited dissemination and application of their ideas in contemporary discourse and practice. To mention some of them are Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), Mother Teresa (1910-1997), Said Nursi (1878-1960), Dalai Lama (1935-), and many others. From Indonesia several figures also dealt with this topic such as H.O.S. Tjokroaminoto (1882-1934), Sukarno (1901-1970), Muhammad Hatta (1902-1980), Haji Agus Salim (1884-1954), Gus Dur/Abdurrahman Wahid (1940-2009), Mangunwijaya (1929-1999), Gedong Bagus Oka (1921-2022), Ahmad Syafii Maarif (1935-2022), and others. These individuals emerged from strong religious traditions and often identified themselves as representatives of their respective faith communities. Nevertheless, as committed believers, they were deeply engaged with pressing social issues and actively collaborated with people from diverse backgrounds in addressing them.

This study aims to delve into the thoughts of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1876-1960)¹, a Muslim thinker and religious leader from Turkey who explored foundational spirit of interreligious dialogue in society and stressed the pivotal role of Islam in modern society. The social context of Turkey at the end of the Ottoman Caliphate (1517-1924) and the beginning of Modern Turkey have urged Said Nursi to think critically about Islam and secularization. Therefore, this study covers question of how Said Nursi understands interreligious dialogue based on his understanding of Islam and how Said Nursi positions interreligious dialogue in a society where Islam was challenged by secularization. Analyzing Said Nursi's writings, this study shows that Said Nursi's exploration of interreligious and societal renewal in the time of changing period of Turkey would contribute important foundations to our current effort to create interreligious dialogue and build peace and coexistence, especially in the context of

¹ In Rumi calendar, Nursi's birth is mentioned in 1293. It has been variously dated from 1876 to 1878. Said Nursi's biographer Sukran Vahide places the date in 1877. See Sukran Vahide, *Bediüzzaman Said Nursi: The Author of the Risale-i Nur* (Istanbul: Istambul Ofset Basim, 1992). Ian Markham and Suendam Birinci Pirim place the date in 1878. See Ian Markham and Suendam Birinci Pirim, *An Introduction to Said Nursi: Life, Thought and Writings* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), p. 3-4.

secularization, plurality, and revitalization of religion. It argues that amidst secularization, particularly in Turkey, collaborations among religions play a central role in building society renewal. Secularization also offers modernization in many aspects which supports society renewal. Religions also support society renewal in many aspects of life. Collaboration is a keyword in building society renewal.

B. Literature Review

The pivotal role of interreligious dialogue as a means of addressing contemporary social issues is increasingly acknowledged not only by religious leaders but also political leaders in different level and places. This decade, the meeting between Pope Francis from the Catholic Church and Sheikh Muhammad al-Tayyeb from Islamic background in Abu Dhabi which is initiated by the emirates' Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan becomes a stepping stone for the current hope for collaboration between religions in combating global issues.² The two leaders signed "*The Document of Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*" on 4th of February 2019.³ The document emphasizes the importance of a culture of encounter and collaboration among religions. Both leaders agree on the role of religions in promoting peace and working together to overcome current social problems such as poverty, ecological issues, fundamentalism, migration, justice, etc. Recently, the interreligious meeting in Masjid Istiqlal, Jakarta, on September 5, 2024 between Pope Francis and Istiqlal's grand imam together with representatives of officially recognised religions in Indonesia also pointed out the centrality of the peaceful coexistence and the need of collaborations working on many social issues.⁴ Moreover, interreligious dialogue is also being developed by the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) and other institutions to build collaborations among different cultures and

² See Heri Setyawan, "Redefining the Role of Religion in Contemporary Society: Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmad Muhammad al-Tayyeb," *JSW (Jurnal Sosiologi Walisongo)*, 3.2 (2019): 111-124, at: <<https://journal.walisongo.ac.id/index.php/JSW/article/view/4023>>, doi:<https://doi.org/10.21580/jsw.2019.3.2.4023>; G. Patrick, "Pope Francis, Culture of Encounter, the Common Good, and Dharma: Public Theological Conversations Today," *Theological Studies*, 84.2 (2023): 212–228 at <https://doi.org/10.1177/00405639231171730>.

³ Pope Francis and Muhammad al-Tayyeb, *Document on Human Fraternity and World Peace*, 4 February 2019 at (http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html). See also R. Catalano, "Is Interreligious Dialogue Changing the Church? The Significance of the *Document on Human Fraternity*" in Mark D. Chapman, Vladimir Latinovic (eds.), *Changing the Church: Pathways for Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), p. 209-215.

⁴ See "Pope Francis and top Indonesian imam make joint call for peace" at <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c5ylzy7drzqo>.

religions in order to counter polarization and extremism. Therefore, dialogue, collaborations, and understanding among different cultures, nations, and communities become key concerns in today's world.⁵

Looking at the role of religions in society, several scholars deal closely with the centrality of collaborations among religions. Vladimir Latinovic, Gerard Mannion, and Peter C. Phan, emphasizes the common ground among religions, especially Abrahamic religions to evolve in collaborations deals with contemporary issues.⁶ Putting the commonality at the center more than what divides among Abrahamic religions, Latinovic, Mannion, Phan and other writers strongly emphasizes the realization of collaborations among religions.⁷ Meanwhile, Twiss emphasizes the role of religions to offer religious ethics. Twiss states that dialogue among religions offers comparative religious ethics which could be a starting point to work together in mutual effort.⁸ Moreover, Atabongwoung argues that particularly in Africa, although encounter between religions is embedded in the daily practices, encounter between African religions and Pentecostalism is a problematic issue. These days, the encounter between these two religious beliefs could be in harmony through communal participation in a liturgical expression with specific common issues, such as ecological and sustainability issues related to land care.⁹ The contemporary researches of interreligious dialogue in Indonesia also show that collaborations between religions on social issues become a common ground. The Pandemic Covid-19 become a stepping stone of collaboration among religions in a crucial time. Moreover, the charity or philanthropy activities, helping the poor, and accompanying the victims such as refugees and victims of natural disaster, are common grounds for doing collaborations among religions in Indonesia.¹⁰

⁵ Jeffrey Haynes, "The United Nations Alliance of Civilizations and Interfaith Dialogue: What Is It Good For?," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 16.3 (2018): 48-60, at doi: 10.1080/15570274.2018.1509281.

⁶ Vladimir Latinovic, Gerard Mannion, and Peter C. Phan (eds.), *Pathways for Inter-Religious Dialogue in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

⁷ See Vladimir Latinovic, Gerard Mannion, and Peter C. Phan, "New Pathways for Interreligious Dialogue: Introduction" in Vladimir Latinovic, Gerard Mannion, and Peter C. Phan (eds.), *Pathways for Inter-Religious Dialogue*, p. 13.

⁸ More information sees Summer B. Twiss and Bruce Grelle (eds.), *Explorations in Global Ethics: Comparative Religious Ethics and Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

⁹ Gallous Atabongwoung, Johannes M. Lütz, and Denise A. Austin, "Invigorating Interfaith Consciousness for the Common Good: Reimagining the Role of African Religion and Pentecostalism in Contemporary South Africa," *Religions*, 14.4 (2023): 1-18 at <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14040486>.

¹⁰ For these issues see Dicky Sofjan dan Muhammad Wildan (ed.), *Virus, Manusia, Tuhan: Refleksi Lintas Iman tentang Covid-19* (Jakarta: Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, 2020).

Research on Said Nursi and modern Turkey has been conducted by several scholars, including Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi¹¹, Şerif Mardin, and Şükran Vahide, highlighting the significance of religion in contributing to social life. However, much of this scholarship tends to focus primarily on the biographical aspects of Nursi's life, often leaving his broader social and interreligious contributions underexplored.¹¹ Abu-Rabi deals with *Risale-i Nur* particularly on its spiritual dimensions. Meanwhile, Mardin contextualizes the role of Said Nursi's thought in the changing of Turkey. Vihade tries to narrate the intellectual history of Said Nursi. Both Mardin and Vihade try to understand Said Nursi in the contexts of modern Turkey, however it entails a general contexts and general role of Nursi. Abu-Rabi's works also understand spiritual and theological thought of Said Nursi which need more elaborations on its social contexts, particularly in a crucial time of Turkey.

C. Research Method and Theoretical Framework

This study employs a qualitative research approach, drawing primarily on Said Nursi's *Risale-i Nur*, with particular attention to his works *The Words* and *The Letters*. Through a close textual analysis, the study seeks to uncover Nursi's insights into interreligious dialogue and encounters among religious traditions, emphasizing his call for cooperation and mutual understanding among faith communities. Additionally, examining Nursi's life within the broader socio-historical context of Turkey offers a more nuanced understanding of the conditions that informed his perspectives on interreligious engagement. His other writings further illuminate his views on the relationship between Islam and the Turkish nation. As secondary sources, this research engages key scholarly works on Said Nursi and the modern history of Turkey, which together provide a framework for situating Nursi's thought on interreligious dialogue within the specific context of Turkey's socio-political transformation.

See also Sri Hartati Samhadi, dkk. *Cendekiawan dan Pandemi Covid 19: Kronik Opini Pilihan Kompas 1* (Jakarta: Penerbit Buku Kompas, 2021); Budi Widianarko, Nirwan Ahmad Arsuka, Budi Karya, et.al. *Cendekiawan dan Pandemi Covid 19: Kronik Opini Pilihan Kompas 2* (Jakarta: Penerbit Buku Kompas, 2023); Irwan Julianto, Rekson Silaban, Haryatmoko, et.al. *Cendekiawan dan Pandemi Covid 19: Kronik Opini Pilihan Kompas 3* (Jakarta: Penerbit Buku Kompas, 2023).

¹¹ See Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi (ed.), *Spiritual Dimensions of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Risale-I Nur* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2008); Serif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989); Sukran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*; edited and with an introduction by Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005).

Adopting the theory of public sphere proposed by Jurgen Habermas, this research frames the correlation between religion, secularization, and post-secularization.¹² Habermas states that public sphere is a deliberative space where people from different backgrounds participate in discussions proposing their concerns to seek for public good.¹³ In public sphere, people articulate their opinions, interact with others, and exchange ideas on public matters. Tracing Habermas's ideas on the position of religion in the secularization, especially his later thoughts, according to Habermas, the public sphere does not fully exclude religion. Religion plays its role in contributing moral values to the public. In other words, in the mid of secularization, religions contribute moral vision and values. Secularization also accepts religions as an entity in the public realm and provides a space for religion to play its public role.

Although Jurgen Habermas's theory of the public sphere has been subject to significant critique in contemporary scholarship, his insights regarding the role of religion in the public sphere remain widely accepted. He emphasizes that the interaction between religion and secularization is not inherently oppositional, but rather constitutes a reciprocal relationship in which both spheres can engage in mutual learning and offer constructive contributions to one another.¹⁴ Tracing the history of Turkey and Said Nursi's approach towards Islam and religions in modern Turkey, this research attempts to understand the role of religions in the midst of secularization in Turkey. The encounter between religions and secularization creates a space to meet, make dialogue, and work together. The encounter puts religions as important agent in the secularization processes. Interreligious dialogue, therefore, plays its significance contributions to the society.

D. Result and Discussion

1. Said Nursi and Islam in Turkey

Said Nursi lived in a crucial time in Islamic history when he witnessed the down of the Ottoman Caliphate with its complexities. However, in this crucial time, Nursi played importance role in reforming Islam in strictly new atmosphere of the society. It

¹² See Jurgen Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," *European Journal of Philosophy*, 14.1 (2006): 1–25. Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983); Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993); Harold Mah, "Phantasies of the Public Sphere: Rethinking the Habermas of Historians," *The Journal of Modern History*, 72.1 (2000): 153–182; John B. Thompson, "The Theory of the Public Sphere," *Theory, Culture & Society*, 10.3 (1993): 173–189.

¹³ Craig Calhoun, "Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere" in Craig Calhoun (ed.) *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, p. 1–48.

¹⁴ See González, J.F. Lozano & P.J. Pérez, "Beyond the Conflict: Religion in the Public Sphere and Deliberative Democracy," *Res Publica*, 15.8 (2009): 251–267 at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11158-009-9093-3>.

was a time when Islam and secularism were understood in opposition and finally created a new Turkey Republic. It was also a time when the West step by step spread out in the East.¹⁵ Moreover, in the changing time when Islamic power and Islamic identity were in transition, Nursi did not being trapped into one choice to be back into the caliphate system, choosing republic system, monarchism, or other specific system of governance.¹⁶ Nursi asked to analyze the problem of Islamic world and coming out with its own thinking.¹⁷ Moreover, Nursi positioned himself as both a religious leader and an intellectual who firmly advocated for the centrality of Islam as a comprehensive way of life. In his view, the primary challenge facing the Islamic world was not rooted in political systems or governance structures, but in the failure to internalize and embody Islamic principles in daily life. Nursi emphasized that true renewal would come not through political power, but through sincere faith and the integration of Islamic values into personal and communal existence. As he expressed, "Islam is final, but God is for all humanity," underscoring both the universality of divine concern and the enduring relevance of Islam for guiding human life.¹⁸

The life of Said Nursi showed his struggles to bring Islam in a complex situation. His foundational thought was based on the spirit of Sufism. Although Said Nursi was mentioned never joining the *tariqat*, but his studies always connected him with Sufi thought. Born in the village of Nurs in Bitlis province of eastern Anatolia, Nursi was familiar with the Sufi tradition. He joined the prayers of Sufi orders, especially of Naqshabandi order. He read the book of Indian Sufi, Sirhindi (d.1624). But he was also inspired by Shaikh 'abd al-Qadir Jilani (d. 1166), a founder of Qadiri Sufi order.¹⁹ As a scholar, thinker, and religious leader, Nursi wrote several books and published collection of his writings from many different topics. He was also eagerly active in social activities which consequently put him into prison and resided in various places and in exile.²⁰

¹⁵ See M. Sait. Özerverli, "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*, 38.4 (2010): 532-553.

¹⁶ See Tamer Balci, "Islam and Democracy in the Thought of Nursi and Gülen" in Tamer Balci and Christopher L. Miller, *The Gülen Hizmet Movement: Circumspect Activism in Faith-Based Reform* (New Castle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012): p. 61-90.

¹⁷ Tamer Balci, "Islam and Democracy in the Thought of Nursi and Gülen", p. 71.

¹⁸ Ian Markham and Suendam Birinci Pirim, *An Introduction to Said Nursi*, p. 54.

¹⁹ Sukran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), p. 5.

²⁰ Qaisar Mohammad, "Clarifications on the Works of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi," *American International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Social*

Said Nursi was imprisoned several times by the secular authorities of the early Turkish Republic primarily due to his religious writings, intellectual influence, and perceived opposition to the state's strict secularization policies. Although Nursi consistently promoted non-violence and did not engage in political rebellion, his efforts to revitalize Islamic faith through his seminal work, the *Risale-i Nur*, and his continued teaching on religious matters were seen as subversive in a context where public expressions of religion were being actively suppressed. He was accused of forming an illegal religious organization and of attempting to undermine the secular state, particularly as his popularity and influence among the public grew. Trials in Eskişehir (1935), Denizli (1944), and Afyon (1948) reflected the state's concern over his religious activism, although he was ultimately acquitted in many cases. Nursi's imprisonment thus illustrates the tension between religious expression and secular nationalism in early Republican Turkey, highlighting how religious figures could be perceived as threats to state ideology even when advocating for peaceful and moral renewal.²¹

He composed *Nurun ilk Kapilari (The First Doors of Light)* in Burdur during his exile in Western Anatolia. Then he reached Barla where he wrote the most known of his books on Qur'anic exegesis entitled *Risale-i Nur (Treatise of Light)*.²² The book of *Risale-i Nur* consists of three parts. One part is about his political activities which he called the old Said (1876-1920), and two other parts are about his thoughts on Islam and society and collection of his letters to his students. This last part is called the new Said (1920-1949).²³ As mentioned by Qaisar, the *Risale-i Nur* took long time to be accepted by Turkish, especially Turkish leaders.²⁴ Kemalist regime forbade the book to be circulated. However, parts by parts of the book were distributed in many different places in Turkey. It was only in 1920s the *Risale-i Nur* and Nursi's writings were

Sciences, 13.2 (2015): 136-138. See also Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State: Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan* (London: Zed books, 1992), p. 257-258.

²¹ Qaisar Mohammad, "Clarifications on the works of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi", p. 137-138.

²² Qaisar Mohammad, "A Brief Sketch of the Memoirs of the Life and Works of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi," *Analisa: Journal of Social Science and Religion*, 3.2 (2018): 207-219.

²³ See Qaisar Mohammad, "A Brief Sketch of the Memoirs of the Life and Works of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi", p. 215; Suleman Essop Dangor, "Said Nursi's Approach to Interfaith Dialogue," *Alternation Special Edition*, 3 (2009): 270-300.

²⁴ Qaisar Mohammad, "Clarifications on the Works of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi", p. 137.

circulated freely. The *Risale-i Nur* central to his thought which also become fundamental source to his Sufi Movement called Nur Movement (*Nurculuk*).²⁵

Although Said Nursi was influenced by Sufi tradition, he criticized Sufi orders which according to Nursi did not play enough role in society where secularism was spreading throughout Turkey. The followers of Nursi, called Nur Movement, organized themselves to be a community and rapidly developed in many different places in the world. In accordance with Said Nursi's thinking, Nur Movement aimed to renew society, but not through political movement or political point of view. Nur Movement's goal is to renew society through transforming individual quality.²⁶ In this line of thought, for Nursi, faith, reason, and all modern qualities should be reconciled. In the words of Nursi, "The Qur'anic interpretation, which addresses problems in the light of reason and science, will shape the future."²⁷

Nursi's primary goal of improving individual quality was putted into practices through education. Said Nursi believed that education would train students for both modern and religious sciences. Since his early years, Nursi put his concern on this issue as Turkey began to gradually become secular toward the end of the nineteenth century during the Tanzimat era (1839–1876). In this Tanzimat era, reform movement developed throughout Ottoman which decreased the role of the *ulema*. The *ulema*, who had served as judges, jurists, professors, librarians, and government agents, were gradually replaced by secular workers who had attended the *Mulkiye*, a special college with a secular curriculum.²⁸ Furthermore, in this changing time, learning is understood differently. People who wanted to study went to secular college not to *ulema* as before. People came to secular institution such as school, hospital, judge, when they wanted to get secular services. People only came to the *ulema* and religious institution when they wanted to get religious services, such as *Imam-khatibe* schools to study for religious matters.²⁹

²⁵ The later generation Islamic movement in Turkey called Hizmet Movement inspired by Fethullah Gulen (b. 1941) is also familiar with this writing.

²⁶ M. Hakan Yavuz, "Islam in the Public Sphere: the Case of the Nur Movement" in M. Hakan Yavuz and John L. Esposito (eds.), *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gulen Movement* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003), p. 1-18.

²⁷ As quoted by Hakan Yavuz from his interview with Fethullah Gulen May 27, 1997, in Hakan Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 152.

²⁸ See Carter Vaughn Findley, "The Tanzimat" in Resat Kasaba (ed.), *Cambridge History of Turkey: Turkey in the Modern World Vol. 4* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 11-37.

²⁹ Serif Mardin, *Religion, Society, and Modernity in Turkey* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2006), p. 276.

Additionally, the administration's structure was also transformed throughout the reform movement. *Ulema*, who had previously served as both administrators and judges, started to give more space to Supreme Court of Judicial Ordinances in 1838. This body was responsible to regulate the judiciary's organizational structure. The boundaries which formed the basis of private and public law prior to the reform era was also altered. Secular laws changed to create clear divisions between public and private law. The secularization of law also extended to business law, which did not originate from *Shari'a* but rather from civil law. The development of science, particularly among younger thinkers, has an impact on Islamic *fiqh* as well.³⁰

At this critical juncture, Said Nursi's objective to educate people on both modern and religious science was to help them to thrive in the modern day. Nursi believed that civilization could only exist when people were mastered on both modern and religious sciences. Therefore, according to this viewpoint, modern science is not opposed to religious sciences. As a result, Nursi emphasized the relevance of both *ilm al-kalam* (theology) and *tafsir* (Quranic exegesis, as well as modern physical and mathematical disciplines).³¹ Nursi's biographer, Sukran Vahide, mentions that religion represents the heart and conscience, while science represents reason.³² Furthermore, Nursi believed that religious sciences are the light of conscience, while modern sciences are the light of reason. The confluence of these two sciences becomes the source of truth.³³

2. The Challenge of Secularism and the Need of Interreligious Dialogue

In many ways, during Said Nursi's lifetime, secularism was frequently perceived as being in direct opposition to religious principles. Nursi was acutely aware of this prevailing tension and sought to critically engage with the underlying ethos of secularism. Rather than rejecting it outright, he offered a thoughtful response by articulating the constructive role that Islam and other religious traditions could play in addressing the moral and spiritual void he believed secularism often produced.

According to Said Nursi, modern civilization is fundamentally grounded in principles such as conflict, self-interest, and the normalization of force, all of which are rooted in an individualistic worldview. During Nursi's time, secularism often manifested itself through coercive and confrontational means, seeking dominance by overcoming or marginalizing opposing perspectives. In his analysis, such a civilization prioritized victory through the defeat of others, rather than fostering mutual understanding, cooperation, or moral development. This spirit tends to divide and

³⁰ Serif Mardin, *Religion, Society, and Modernity in Turkey*, p. 276.

³¹ Sukran Vahide, "Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Approach to Religious Renewal and Its Impact on Aspects of Contemporary Turkish Society", p. 56.

³² Sukran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, p. 45.

³³ Sukran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, p. 45-46.

develope hatred. In the contexts of encounter and social differences, in Nursi's words, the basis of secularism was "...racism and negative nationalism".³⁴ Moreover, individualism become the spirit of secularism. Nursi understood that secularism always tries to win and works for the sake of its own groups, rather than community. Secularism which lies in the spirit of liberalism seeks for gaining profit for itself. As a result, in economics and other aspects of life, secularism only beneficial for particular groups and left the weak behind.³⁵ Therefore, in Nursi's understanding, the majority groups experience poverty while only small percentage of the society live in wealthiness.³⁶

This situation, according to Said Nursi, is in opposition to the Qur'an. Qur'an teaches to live in 'truth' instead of force. Nursi mentioned that live in the Qur'an put "the principle of mutual assistance" in life, rather than conflict.³⁷ Moreover, the objectives of the Qur'an are "virtue and God's pleasure", rather than benefit. In relation to community, while secularism chooses conflict and force as its way of life, Qur'an promotes "the bonds of religion, class, and country".³⁸ Therefore, it could be understood, in Nursi's imagination, society is hastened in friendship and brotherhood.

Moreover, according to Said Nursi, through living according to the Qur'an, people could support one to each other. Brotherhood and friendship become manifestation of religion in the society. "The mark of religion is brotherhood and attraction," as stated by Nursi.³⁹ It is not conflict, but friendship which become the spirit of togetherness. These conditions create happiness and joy among people. Additionally, according to Said Nursi, the deep purpose of human life is searching for universal peace.⁴⁰ Society, is not only become the place to develop peaceful condition, but also helps every people to achieve human perfection. Society also create barriers against improper emotions to help its members.⁴¹

In this situation, secularism require reform in many aspects. Modern civilization is lack of mutual social friendship. Relationship among people in these conditions is

³⁴ See Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *The Words: On the Nature and Purposes of Man, Life, and All Things*, trans. Sukran Vehide (Ankara: Ihlas Nur Nesriyat, 2002), p. 420.

³⁵ Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *The Words*, p. 420.

³⁶ Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *The Words*, p. 420-421.

³⁷ Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *The Words*, p. 421.

³⁸ Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *The Words*, p. 421.

³⁹ Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *The Words*, p. 421.

⁴⁰ Abdelaziz Berghout, "Nursi's Vision for a New Universal Culture of Dialogue", in Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi (ed.), *Spiritual Dimensions*, p. 234-235.

⁴¹ Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *The Words*, p. 421.

built upon individualism. It has far from the purpose of civilization to help its members to build good society for all.

a. The Basis of Interreligious Dialogue

Said Nursi's approach to interreligious dialogue can be understood through both his writings and his concrete actions within the context of a rapidly transforming Turkish society. In practice, Nursi demonstrated a positive and respectful attitude toward individuals of other religious traditions. He actively engaged with religious leaders, fostering relationships grounded in mutual respect and a shared commitment to peace and harmony. A notable example of this engagement occurred in 1950, when Nursi presented a collection of his *Risale-i Nur* writings as a gift to Pope Pius XII, symbolizing his openness to interfaith cooperation and his recognition of the importance of dialogue between religious communities.⁴² Both become supporters of justice and peace makers. They also believed that religions could give its significant contributions to support for justice and peace.⁴³ Said Nursi also met Patriarch Athanagoras, archbishop of Constantinople, in Istanbul in 1953 to work together on peace building.⁴⁴

In his writings on Islam and his critiques of Western modernization, particularly its association with secularization, Said Nursi at times also offered critical reflections on Christianity, especially regarding its role in confronting the challenges posed by secular ideologies. However, rather than viewing other religions as adversaries, Nursi regarded them as potential partners in addressing the moral and spiritual crises of modernity. He maintained a constructive and respectful attitude toward religious others, advocating for interreligious collaboration in the pursuit of peace, justice, and the common good. According to Nursi, it is the Qur'an 3:64 which could be foundation for interreligious dialogue for society renewal.⁴⁵ The Qur'an says:⁴⁶

⁴² Leo D. Lefebure, "Wisdom, Prophecy, and the Guidance of Humanity: Pope John XXIII and Bediuzzaman Said Nursi," *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies*, 2.2 (2017): 42-61.

⁴³ Leo D. Lefebure, "Roman Catholic Theological Engagement with Said Nursi" in Ian S. Markham dan Zeyneb Sayilgan (ed.), *The Companion to Said Nursi Studies* (Oregon: Pickwick, 2017), p. 356-377; Thomas Michel, "The Risale-i Nur: An Islamic Alternative to the Islamic State," *Hawwa*, 13.2 (2015): 184-197.

⁴⁴ Fatih Varol, *Religious Freedom as a Practice of the Nation: Religious Minorities, Islamic Revival, and the Emergence of Defensive Inclusion in Turkey* (Illinois : University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2015), p. 129.

⁴⁵ Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *The Words*, p. 420. See also Suleman Essop Dangor, "Said Nursi's Approach to Interfaith Dialogue", p. 287.

⁴⁶ The translation of the Quran being used here is from Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of The Glorious Qur'an* (Cairo: Dar Al-Kitab Al-Masri, 1972).

“O People of the Scripture! Come to an agreement between us and you: that we shall worship none but Allah, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside Allah. And if they turn away, then say: Bear witness that we are they who have surrendered (unto Him).”

Nursi interprets this verse as a call for all People of the Book to seek mutual understanding and engage in cooperative efforts. He emphasizes that individuals from diverse religious traditions can find common ground and work together based on shared values. Furthermore, he views such collaboration not merely as a possibility, but as a moral imperative for promoting peace and the common good. Worshiping Allah, according to Nursi, unites believers to build brotherhood and friendship. As he states, from the mid of brotherhood grows the virtue of “mutual support” and “mutual assistance”.⁴⁷

Furthermore, collaboration among “people of the Scripture” aims to work together giving contributions to the society. It creates opportunities to address social problems. For Nursi, the challenges of modern civilizations urge people from various religious backgrounds to unite in effort for the common good of society. In regard to this, Nursi wrote:⁴⁸

“In the ties between communities it accepts ‘the bonds of religion, class, and country,’ in place of racialism and nationalism. And, the result of reining in and tethering the evil-commanding soul and leaving the spirit free and urging it towards perfection is happiness in this world and the next.”

Although collaboration among religious communities is a moral imperative, Said Nursi acknowledges that challenges may arise, particularly concerning the interpretation of certain Qur’anic verses. He emphasizes the importance of approaching the Qur’an with careful and contextual understanding. Nursi highlights that the Qur’an expresses respect toward Jews and Christians, recognizing them as People of the Book. Regarding the issue of conversion, he notes that while the Qur’an affirms Islam as the final and most complete revelation, it does not advocate coercion, nor does it compel Jews and Christians to convert, thus upholding the principle of religious freedom and mutual respect.⁴⁹ In Nursi’s ideas, love and respect for others is the foundation for living together. Additionally, Nursi mentioned that many Jewish and Christians remain as good Jewish and Christians while living together with Muslims and giving its support for the society.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *The Words*, p. 421.

⁴⁸ Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *The Words*, p. 421. See also Suleman Essop Dangor, "Said Nursi's Approach to Interfaith Dialogue", p. 287.

⁴⁹ Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *The Words*, p. 469.

⁵⁰ Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *The Words*, p. 469-470.

b. Interreligious Dialogue for Society Renewal

Considering the foundations of interreligious dialogue and Said Nursi's broader project of renewing Islam and society, it could be understood that interreligious dialogue, according to Nursi, should come to renew society, working for global peace, and to attain human dignity for every people. He envisions interfaith cooperation as a vital force in addressing the moral and spiritual crises of modern civilization. Central to Nursi's vision is the belief that modern civilization must be renewed through the integration of divine values, ensuring that progress is grounded in ethical and spiritual principles.

Although Said Nursi often expressed strong criticisms of modern civilization, he also acknowledged its significant contributions and potential benefits. He recognized that modern civilization, through advancements in science and technology, has expanded human capacities and created new opportunities for building a more inclusive and humane society. Nursi appreciated the virtues embedded within modern developments, particularly when they are used in service of the common good. In this regard, his perspective resonates with Jürgen Habermas's understanding of the public sphere, where rational discourse and shared values can facilitate the development of a more just and democratic society. Both thinkers emphasize the importance of engaging modernity critically, rather than rejecting it outright.

Nevertheless, Nursi also warned of the dangers inherent in modern civilization, especially the spread of what he termed "aggressive atheism," which he viewed as a major threat to the moral and spiritual foundations of society.⁵¹ He considered unbelief not merely as a personal stance but as a societal force that undermines human dignity and social cohesion. In the context of interreligious relations, Nursi—echoing the insights of scholars such as Thomas Michel—argued that collaboration among believers, particularly between Muslims and Christians, is essential to confronting these challenges.⁵² For Nursi, the renewal of society requires the cultivation of both moral virtue and rational capacity. True civilization, he argued, can only emerge when individuals commit themselves to ethical principles such as truthfulness, honesty, justice, and compassion.⁵³ In this way, Nursi envisioned a civilization grounded in

⁵¹ See Thomas Michel, "Muslim-Christian Dialogue and Cooperation in the Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi", available in [Muslim Christian Dialogue and Cooperation - Risale-i Nur](#) accessed in December 15, 2024.

⁵² See Thomas Michel, "Muslim-Christian Dialogue and Cooperation in the Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi", available in [Muslim Christian Dialogue and Cooperation - Risale-i Nur](#) accessed in December 15, 2024.

⁵³ M. Sait Özerverli, "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*, 38.1 (2010), 532–553.

human dignity and moral renewal—ideals that align closely with Habermas’s vision of a public sphere enriched by both secular and religious contributions to democratic life.

Nursi also gave his interest on the importance of human dignity of governors or leaders. According to Nursi government is a servant. They are not leaders in term of gaining power, but workers for people. In this line of thought, Nursi had a positive opinion about non-Muslim who serve in governmental position. As stated by Özerverli as long as they serve people, non-Muslim could be a governmental leader.⁵⁴ Moreover, to every citizen, Nursi also emphasized the importance of being good citizens. According to Nursi, “the state needs good citizens and pious believers make good citizens.”⁵⁵ Above all, moral quality in which all morality should be based on, according to Nursi is sincerity (*ihlas*).⁵⁶ Every deed should be based on the sincerity. Love and sincerity, therefore fundamentals of renewing society.

E. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has examined Bediüzzaman Said Nursi’s understanding of interreligious dialogue as a crucial means for social renewal during the period of intense secularization in Turkey. Nursi perceived the secular reforms of the early Turkish Republic as a double-edged development—introducing modernization in fields such as education, economics, and public administration, while simultaneously weakening the role of religion and contributing to moral and social fragmentation. In response, Nursi called for a faith-based engagement with the world, emphasizing that believers must remain rooted in their spiritual commitments while also responding actively to the challenges of their time. His approach resonates with Jurgen Habermas’s later reflections on the role of religion in the public sphere, particularly the idea that religious voices, when translated into publicly accessible language, can enrich democratic discourse and contribute to the moral orientation of modern societies.

Central to Nursi’s vision is the idea that interreligious dialogue should be grounded in sincere faith, mutual respect, and a shared ethical responsibility to improve society. He viewed such dialogue as a practical path toward overcoming the common afflictions of ignorance, poverty, and division, which he believed threatened the moral fabric of society. In a post-secular society where religious and secular worldviews can coexist and engage in mutual learning, Nursi envisioned a model in which religion and modernity need not be in opposition. Instead, through interreligious collaboration, religion can play a constructive role in shaping a more just, compassionate, and morally grounded social order.

⁵⁴ M. Sait Özerverli, “The Reconstruction of Islamic Social Thought in the Modern Period”, p. 543.

⁵⁵ Ian Markham and Suendam Birinci Pirim, *An Introduction to Said Nursi*, p. 53.

⁵⁶ Sukran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, p. 63.

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