

Medresetü'z-Zehra: Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Vision of Reconciliatory Education in the Post-Ottoman Era

Dhita Ayomi Purwaningtyas¹, M. Yemmardatillah²

dhitaayomi@unp.ac.id¹, yemmardatillah@unp.ac.id²

Universitas Negeri Padang^{1,2}

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Article history: Received, May 4 th , 2025 Revised, May 18 th , 2025 Accepted, May 20 th , 2025	<i>The collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of the Turkish Republic created deep epistemological and sociopolitical ruptures, marginalising religious education and ethnolinguistic diversity. In response, Said Nursi proposed Medresetü'z-Zehra—a visionary model of education aimed at reconciling religious and rational sciences within a pluralistic framework. This study explores Medresetü'z-Zehra as a postcolonial educational project addressing epistemological fragmentation and cultural homogenisation. Employing a qualitative historical-analytical method, the research analyses primary texts from Nursi's Risale-i Nur and contextualises his vision against Ottoman reforms and Republican secular policies. The findings reveal that Medresetü'z-Zehra represents a profound model of epistemological integration, promoting unity of knowledge (wahdat al-'ilm) and ethical formation while affirming linguistic and cultural plurality. In conclusion, Nursi's educational philosophy offers a reconciliatory framework for contemporary Muslim societies seeking to harmonise tradition and modernity without sacrificing diversity and moral integrity.</i>
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Corresponding Author: Dhita Ayomi Purwaningtyas , Department of Islamic Education, Faculty of Social Science, Universitas Negeri Padang, Indonesia, Email: dhitaayomi@unp.ac.id, Phone Number Author: 082131860980	



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1. Introduction

The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Turkish Republic represented not merely a political realignment but a deliberate and far-reaching reconfiguration of the intellectual, political, and cultural life of Muslim communities across Anatolia. In the name of secularisation and national consolidation, education was rapidly transformed into a strategic instrument—less a neutral vehicle for modernisation than a calculated means to dismantle religious authority and to suppress the region's ethnolinguistic pluralism (Mardin, 1989). The tension between traditional Islamic schooling (*madrasah*) and Western-style secular

education (*mekteb*), already apparent since the Tanzimat era, grew far more pronounced in the early Republican period. Religious instruction was systematically dismantled, and a uniform curriculum was enforced under the Ministry of National Education (Ozgun, 2012). These shifts led to a widening epistemological divide and entrenched deep social inequalities, particularly in Kurdish regions at the empire's fringes, where religious, linguistic, and cultural expressions came under mounting pressure and control (Cagaptay, 2005)

In this context, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1877–1960), a prominent Kurdish Muslim scholar, articulated a unique vision of educational reform through the proposal of *Medresetü'z-Zehra*—an integrated university that sought to unite religious and rational sciences, promote moral formation, and uphold linguistic pluralism (Vahide, 2005). More than a pedagogical initiative, the project represented a reconciliatory response to the early modern Turkish state's epistemic fragmentation and sociopolitical exclusion. While Nursi's educational philosophy has received considerable scholarly attention for its theological depth and relevance to Islamic pedagogy (Yusoff et al., 2016). There remains a significant gap in contextual studies that locate his vision within the post-Ottoman sociohistorical transformations. This study filled that gap by examining *Medresetü'z-Zehra* as a counter-hegemonic educational project that challenges both the epistemological legacies of colonial modernity and the sociocultural homogenisation policies of the Turkish Republic. It explores how Nursi's model offers a path toward integrative and pluralistic Islamic education rooted in justice, inclusion, and metaphysical coherence.

2. Literature Review

A substantial body of scholarship has examined Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's educational vision, particularly his proposal of *Medresetü'z-Zehra* as a model to reconcile the epistemological rupture between religious and secular knowledge in the Muslim world. Embong et al. (2017) underscore the project's integrative design as a response to the dualistic educational structures imposed by colonialism and modern secular states. Similarly, Ayathurrahman and Shodiq (2023) highlight the relevance of Nursi's model in addressing contemporary challenges in digital Islamic education, while Yusof et al. (2016) explore its harmonisation of *naqli* (revealed) and *'aqli* (rational) sciences as a corrective to the spiritual void of modern materialism. Earlier critiques by Rosnani Hashim and al-Attas provide foundational support for the Islamization of knowledge, aligning with Nursi's call for restoring epistemic balance.

However, despite these affirmations, most existing studies have focused on Nursi's epistemology in abstract or philosophical terms without sufficiently situating his educational vision within the sociohistorical context of late Ottoman reforms and the nation-building project of the early Turkish Republic. This gap leaves unexplored how *Medresetü'z-Zehra* functioned not merely as an intellectual project, but also as a counter-hegemonic institution aiming to restore cultural pluralism, regional equity, and spiritual sovereignty in an era of aggressive secular-nationalist homogenisation.

Addressing this gap, the study offers a contextualised analysis of *Medresetü'z-Zehra* as a reconciliatory educational framework that responds simultaneously to epistemic fragmentation and sociopolitical marginalisation. It thereby contributes a novel interdisciplinary synthesis at the intersection of Islamic education, postcolonial theory, and Turkish modernisation, aligning with Edward Said's broader vision that "the Orient is not an inert fact of nature" but a contested space of knowledge and power, necessitating critical reclamation by formerly subjugated societies (Said, 1978).

3. Method

This study adopts a qualitative historical-analytical approach anchored in the integrative epistemology of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi. Methodologically, it combines the textual interpretation of primary sources with the critical engagement of scholarly literature to examine the epistemic and sociohistorical foundations of Nursi's educational vision. The research primarily engages with Nursi's seminal works—*Risale-i Nur*—alongside Ottoman and Republican educational policies to contextualise the conceptual and institutional emergence of *Medresetü'z-Zehra* (Vahide, 2005). At the core of this inquiry lies the metaphysical principle of *wahdat al-'ilm* (unity of knowledge), which informs the study's theoretical and analytical framework.

The analysis unfolds on two interrelated levels. First, it undertakes an epistemological reading of *wahdat al-'ilm* as a critique of the dichotomy between religious (*naqli*) and secular (*'aqli*) sciences, proposing a complementary and holistic epistemic paradigm (Yusoff et al., 2016). Second, it conducts a sociohistorical analysis of the tensions between religious identity, linguistic plurality, and the homogenising impulses of nationalist education policy during the late Ottoman and early Republican periods (Somel, 2001). Within this framework, Nursi's educational philosophy emerges as a pedagogical response and a comprehensive civilizational project to reconcile faith and reason, tradition and modernity, unity and plurality.

4. Discussion

a. Historical Context: From Empire to Republic

Late Ottoman Reforms

During the late Ottoman period, a deep sense of vulnerability had taken hold among its ruling elites. With internal decay-accelerating and European intervention intensifying, the push for reform was driven less by visionary ambition than by a pressing fear of collapse. In this atmosphere of defensive urgency, the Tanzimat reforms (1839–1876) were launched—an ambitious, though often incoherent, project aimed at reengineering the empire's legal, administrative, and educational foundations. Education, in particular, became a key front in this struggle: not simply a channel for disseminating modern ideas, but a deliberate instrument for manufacturing loyalty, instilling discipline, and crafting

a new type of subjectivity tethered to the authority of the central state. At the heart of this vision was the creation of secular schools (*mekteb*), intended to cultivate a technocratic elite who could administer the machinery of a modern state and project an image of Ottoman governance increasingly modelled after European norms (Somel, 2001).

Yet the reforms never fully displaced the older traditions they sought to reform. The madrasahs, long the heart of Islamic pedagogy and religious authority, remained deeply embedded in the educational landscape. Rather than replacing them, the new secular institutions grew alongside them, creating a fractured intellectual environment. Mektebs promoted positivist sciences, administrative rationality, and Western pedagogical methods, while madrasahs continued to center their curricula on Islamic jurisprudence, Arabic language, and theological inquiry.

This uneasy coexistence pointed to deeper currents of tension within Ottoman society. The Tanzimat reforms, far from bridging the divide between old and new, often deepened it, giving rise to parallel visions of knowledge, authority, and social order. Ultimately, the effort to modernise education revealed the limits of state-led reform itself, exposing the complexities of negotiating between inherited traditions and the demands of a rapidly changing world (Somel, 2001).

This bifurcation had significant consequences for the social mobility of peripheral communities. Access to *mekteb*-based education was often limited to urban centres and Turkish-speaking populations. In contrast, madrasahs remained the educational lifeline for rural and non-Turkish regions, including the Kurdish-dominated eastern provinces. Consequently, modernising education disproportionately benefited elites in Istanbul and other major cities. At the same time, the majority Muslim population in the periphery remained tied to religious learning structures that were increasingly devalued by the state. This uneven distribution of educational capital fostered long-term inequalities that only intensified in the early Republican period (Somel, 2001).

Reflecting on this period, it becomes clear that the *Tanzimat* reforms planted the seeds of an epistemic rupture that was never adequately healed. Instead of integrating the knowledge traditions of Islam with the emerging disciplines of the modern age, the state chose to institutionalise their separation. The result was not an educational synthesis but a fragmentation that the secular-nationalist ideology of the Turkish Republic would later exploit. The failure to reconcile these educational paradigms left a legacy of mistrust between religious communities and the state, one that reformers like Said Nursi sought to bridge through initiatives such as *Medresetü'z-Zehra* (Mardin, 1989).

Rise of Turkish Nationalism

The establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923 marked a sharp departure from the Ottoman Empire's long-standing, if hierarchical, tradition of social pluralism. Under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the new state embraced an assertive form of secular Turkish nationalism, seeking to create a strong, unified national identity by downplaying ethnic, linguistic, and religious differences. Education became a primary instrument of this ideological project. The Law on the Unification of Education (1924) was designed not merely to streamline administration but to eliminate the epistemological authority of Islamic institutions. By abolishing madrasahs and subordinating all forms of education to the Ministry of National Education, the law effectively severed the organic link between Islamic knowledge and public instruction (Zurcher, 2003).

This push for educational centralisation was accompanied by extensive cultural reforms, most notably the introduction of the Latin alphabet in 1928. Although officially justified as a means to boost literacy, the alphabet reform also severed the Turkish people's historical and literary ties to their Ottoman and Islamic heritage. Textbooks were rewritten, curricula restructured, and religious education systematically removed from public schools. In addition, minority languages such as Kurdish, Armenian, and Arabic were prohibited in educational and governmental settings. These measures eroded linguistic diversity and undermined non-Turkish communities' cultural memory and identity (Cagaptay, 2005).

The ideological goal was clear: to manufacture a homogeneous national subject—secular, loyal, Turkish-speaking, and culturally aligned with the West. Education was deployed as a medium of cultural standardisation, with the Turkish language cast as both a vehicle of modernisation and a symbol of national belonging. This created profound dissonance for communities whose cultural practices, oral traditions, and religious values were rendered invisible or subversive in the new national narrative. Kurdish, Arabic, and Persian—once integral to the Islamic civilisational discourse—were now seen as relics of a backwards past, incompatible with the vision of a modern Turkey (Mardin, 1989).

From a reflective standpoint, these homogenisation policies reveal the paradox of early Republican reforms: the state exacerbated its internal divisions, seeking to unify the nation. Rather than embracing pluralism as a foundation for cohesion, the Kemalist project viewed difference as a threat to be eliminated. In this light, education functioned less as a tool for emancipation and more as a mechanism of assimilation. It is precisely against this backdrop that Said Nursi's vision gains critical significance as a counter-hegemonic framework that proposed unity without uniformity and diversity without division (Markham & Pirim, 1988).

The Marginalisation of Eastern Anatolia

Nowhere was the impact of Republican education reforms more acutely felt than in the Kurdish-majority regions of Eastern Anatolia. While the Ottoman Empire had granted relative autonomy to its eastern provinces and allowed Kurdish tribes to administer local affairs, the Turkish Republic redefined the region as a site of internal otherness. Kurdish language, dress, and customs were criminalised, and public expression of Kurdish identity was suppressed. The denial of the very term "Kurd" in official documents and public education reinforced a policy of cultural erasure aimed at rendering the Kurds invisible within the boundaries of the Turkish nation-state (Cagaptay, 2005).

The educational marginalisation of Kurds was both symbolic and structural. Schools in the East were few, underfunded, and often run by military personnel rather than trained educators. Kurdish children faced dual exclusion: they were alienated linguistically—forced to study in a language they did not speak at home—and culturally—educated in a curriculum that denied their heritage and vilified their communal leaders. Illiteracy remained disproportionately high in these regions. For instance, in 1935, the literacy rate in Ağrı was only 6.3%, compared to a national average of 20.4% (Yılmaz, 2013).

The early Republican view of the East as a zone of threat rather than a site of investment is also emphasised by Mardin (1989), who illustrates how policies of repression and surveillance supplanted any genuine developmental vision. Lewis (Lewis, 1972) further notes that Kurdish regions were routinely seen through a securitised lens rather than as communities with historical depth and cultural contributions.

Said Nursi's *Medresetü'z-Zehra* was envisioned precisely as a corrective to this systemic neglect. Located near the Kurdish heartlands, the proposed university aimed to serve as an intellectual centre that could integrate religious and scientific knowledge while respecting the linguistic and cultural specificities of the region. Nursi's insistence on using Kurdish alongside Turkish and Arabic was revolutionary, not because it was radical, but because it was restorative. It sought to heal the epistemological rupture created by the nationalist state and to affirm that Islam, knowledge, and culture could coexist without hierarchy or exclusion (Vahide, 2005).

Looking back on this historical moment, the Kurdish experience in early Republican Turkey highlights the risks inherent in epistemic violence and cultural suppression. Instead of fostering a shared civic identity, the state's exclusionary policies only widened the divide between the centre and the periphery. In contrast, Nursi's vision of reconciliation presents an alternative educational model built on recognition, dialogue, and spiritual integrity. His approach offers insights that

remain deeply relevant for contemporary societies as they navigate the complex challenges of achieving educational justice in diverse settings.

b. Medresetü'z-Zehra as a Reconciliatory Project Epistemological Foundations and Educational Design

The Medresetü'z-Zehra project, conceived by Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, constitutes a deliberate epistemic and civilisational intervention in response to the post-Ottoman rupture caused by secular modernity and the epistemological disorientation of Muslim societies. Rather than adopting a reactionary stance or embracing Western paradigms wholesale, Nursi proposed an educational model rooted in *wahdat al-ilm* (the unity of knowledge), reconciling the perceived antinomy between revelation (*wahy*) and reason (*'aql*) (Siddiq, 2021; Ayathurrahman & Shodiq, 2023). In Nursi's view, both domains represent intertwined modalities of accessing truth: the empirical sciences uncover divine regularities in the cosmos, while revelation offers teleological insight and ethical orientation. This integrative vision subverted the Enlightenment dichotomy of sacred versus secular and critiqued traditionalist approaches that insulated Islamic knowledge from the demands of modern inquiry (Embong et al., 2017).

This integration, however, was more than just a theoretical idea. It entailed a deep belief in understanding reality as layered with divine meaning—a view underpinned by Nursi's doctrine of *mana-i harfi*, which posits that all entities signify realities beyond themselves, pointing toward divine attributes (Aydin, 2019). Moreover, Nursi's critique of materialism stands apart from this integrative vision. He drew a critical distinction between material sciences and pure sciences, warning against the former's potential to obscure metaphysical truths (Khamami, 2015). As such, knowledge is not an autonomous enterprise but a form of worship, cultivating *ma'rifatullah* (knowledge of God). This renders every act of learning inherently spiritual and moral, resisting the secular reduction of education to material utility (Ihsan et al., 2021).

The curriculum of Medresetü'z-Zehra, which integrated the religious sciences (*'ulūm al-dīniyyah*), rational sciences (*'ulūm al-'aqliyyah*), and ethical cultivation, exemplified a deliberate synthesis aimed at fostering intellectual and moral unity. The trilingual medium of instruction—Arabic, Turkish, and Kurdish—was not merely a token gesture toward inclusivity, but rather a strategic affirmation of pluralistic identity formation within the Islamic ummah. Arabic conveyed the revelatory tradition, Turkish facilitated engagement with state structures and contemporary thought, while Kurdish preserved local epistemologies often suppressed by nationalist homogenisation (Marazi, 2015). Nursi disrupted monolingual modernity through this linguistic plurality and asserted the compatibility of faith, cultural heterogeneity, and intellectual sophistication.

The table below highlights the distinguishing features of Nursi's educational model in contrast to its Ottoman and Republican predecessors:

Table 1. Comparative Structure of Educational Models

Aspect	<i>Madrasah</i> (Traditional Islamic School)	<i>Mekteb</i> (Modern Secular School)	<i>Medresetü'z-Zehra</i>
Knowledge Focus	Religious sciences (Qur'an, hadith, fiqh)	Rational/scientific knowledge (math, science, civics)	Integration of religious and rational sciences (<i>wahdat al-'ilm</i>)
Epistemology	Revelation-centered (<i>wahy</i>)	Empirical and positivist	Unity of revelation and reason; spiritual meaning in all knowledge
Language Instruction	Arabic (primarily)	Turkish (post-Ottoman standard)	Trilingual: Arabic, Turkish, Kurdish
Cultural Orientation	Islamic tradition and ethics	Western/secular modernism	Pluralistic Islamic worldview affirming cultural diversity
Institutional Purpose	Preserve Islamic knowledge and clergy	Produce modern bureaucrats and secular citizens	Form holistic Muslim intellectuals with moral and civic responsibility
View on Pluralism	Implicit acceptance (varied by region)	Suppression of non-Turkish identities	Affirmation of linguistic and ethnic pluralism
Relation to the State	Often autonomous or religiously linked	State-controlled and standardised	Independent but harmonising faith and civic life
Ethical Emphasis	Strong moral-ethical formation	Often value-neutral, focused on utility	Moral-spiritual cultivation (<i>ma'rifatullah, taziyah al-nafs</i>)

Nursi's educational ethos addressed what he perceived as a civilisational fracture: the rupture between the spiritual and the material, the revealed and the rational, the divine and the empirical. In this model, the student is not merely a vessel of information but a holistic being whose spiritual, intellectual, and moral faculties must be harmonised—a synthesis that Western educational dualisms

often fail to realise. Proper education, in this vision, cultivates *īmān taḥqīqī*—faith anchored in verified, contemplative understanding—while simultaneously fostering *tazkiyah al-nafs* (ethical purification) and rational inquiry (Ihsan et al., 2022).

Still, the implementation of such a spiritually integrated model within the ideological constraints of a secular-nationalist regime was fraught with tensions. Nursi's vision challenged the deep-seated legacy of colonial dualism, which severed *al-ʿulūm al-dīniyyah* from *al-ʿulūm al-dunyawiyyah* (Marazi, 2015). Yet it also served as a quiet but radical response to the Enlightenment presumption of value-neutral knowledge. Medresetü'z-Zehra was not simply a scholastic venture; it was a social regeneration project, seeking to produce Muslim intellectuals who could engage with modernity without capitulating it. In doing so, Nursi's educational vision resonates, perhaps unwittingly, with Edward Said's (1978) call for "worldly criticism"—a mode of intellectual practice attentive to institutions' material, political, and historical embeddedness.

Building upon this integrative philosophy, Medresetü'z-Zehra offered a pioneering model for epistemological synthesis, directly confronting the entrenched divide between religious and rational sciences. Unlike Tanzimat-era reforms, which institutionalised parallel tracks for religious and secular education, Nursi envisioned a unified framework where natural sciences pursued with spiritual insight became extensions of theological reflection, and theology gained vitality through engagement with empirical reality (Valk et al., 2020).

Nursi's moral philosophy—grounded in pluralism, democracy, and ethical responsibility—infused Medresetü'z-Zehra with a vision of Islamic civil society that transcended nostalgic revivalism (Bilici, 2008). His commitment to constitutionalism and dialogue situates his project within broader debates on indigenous Islamic models of democracy. Nevertheless, the historical marginalisation of Medresetü'z-Zehra under the Turkish Republic's secularist policies illustrates the limits of idealistic educational reform when confronted with coercive state structures.

Medresetü'z-Zehra is a critical site where the complexities and contradictions of negotiating postcolonial modernity are acutely revealed. Its enduring significance lies in illuminating the ongoing struggle to weave revelation, reason, unity, and diversity into an ethical and intellectual fabric capable of sustaining a renewed Islamic civilization.

Reconciliation of Identity

The fall of the Ottoman Empire shattered the shared faith and unity that had connected Muslim societies, leaving many disoriented in a world now divided by race, nationalism, and ideology. Bediüzzaman Said Nursi viewed this as more than a political crisis and turned to the Qur'an, offering its universal message as a way

to rebuild a more profound sense of belonging beyond borders and differences. His project was neither a nostalgic retreat into the past nor a wholesale adoption of modernity's categories; instead, it was a critical retrieval of Islamic principles to heal the fractures imposed by secular nationalism and colonial epistemologies (Yusoff, 2013).

This vision found concrete expression in the design of *Medresetü'z-Zehra*, where identity challenges were addressed in theory and within the fabric of education itself. At a moment when Turkish nationalism increasingly equated citizenship with cultural homogenisation, Nursi proposed a trilingual educational model—Arabic, Turkish, and Kurdish—that affirmed the coexistence of diverse linguistic and cultural identities under the broader canopy of *ukhuwwah Islamiyyah* (Islamic brotherhood). By embedding pluralism within an Islamic ethical framework, *Medresetü'z-Zehra* resisted the assimilative pressures of the Kemalist state, offering instead a vision of solidarity that transcended the confines of race, ethnicity, and language (Cagaptay, 2005).

This approach reflects Nursi's nuanced understanding of identity as a multilayered construct in which ethnic, linguistic, and religious dimensions coexist without contradiction. He did not call for the dissolution of Kurdishness into Turkishness, nor did he support ethnonational separatism. Instead, he offered a mediating discourse in which cultural diversity was seen as a divinely willed feature of human society to be harmonised rather than erased (Nursi, 2021). In this light, *Medresetü'z-Zehra* becomes a pedagogical project and a theological statement on coexistence and mutual dignity.

Nursi's reconciliation of identity also extended to the pedagogical ethos of the institution. In Nursi's educational vision, teachers and students were never passive transmitters of knowledge; they were conceived as moral agents, tasked with bridging ethnic and cultural divides through a shared commitment to faith and intellectual sincerity. His approach anticipated, in striking ways, contemporary theories of pluralism that privilege ethical inclusion over rigid demands for structural assimilation. Where dominant models often framed minority cultures as obstacles to national cohesion, Nursi saw them instead as vital reservoirs of civilisational renewal—a resource to be embraced, not a threat to be managed (Gok, 2012).

At a moment when many Muslim societies remain caught between the competing imperatives of national integration and cultural recognition, Nursi's model offers a sharp and prescient alternative. Instead of being caught in the traps of exclusionary nationalism or settling for an essentialist multiculturalism that locks identities into rigid categories, Nursi's reconciliatory vision reaches for something more profound: a shared moral foundation rooted in the Islamic tradition (Gok, 2012). His framework does more than offer an alternative; it delivers a quiet but profound critique of the dominant paradigms of his era—and,

just as importantly, unsettles many of the assumptions that continue to shape contemporary thinking about education, identity, and social cohesion.

Sociopolitical Function

Beyond its pedagogical function, *Medresetü'z-Zehra* carried significant sociopolitical implications. In the context of the Turkish Republic's aggressive assimilationist policies, particularly regarding the Kurds and religious communities, the institution represented a peaceful, educational resistance to cultural erasure. His project asserted that Islamic unity need not entail ethnolinguistic homogenisation and that national cohesion could be achieved through mutual recognition rather than forced assimilation (Cagaptay, 2005).

Moreover, *Medresetü'z-Zehra* embodied a vision of Islamic solidarity that transcended ethnic divides. In doing so, he offered an alternative model of citizenship—rooted in shared moral values, communal trust, and intellectual excellence—rather than ethnonational identity. His emphasis on peaceful engagement, patient reform, and non-violent resistance reflected prophetic dissent ethics deeply grounded in Islamic principles.

From a reflective perspective, *Medresetü'z-Zehra* can be seen as a rare example of an educational institution designed as a mode of social healing. In contrast to revolutionary or oppositional ideologies that seek to overthrow oppressive systems through confrontation, Nursi's strategy was one of constructive subversion—challenging the ideological premises of the state not through rebellion but through education, dialogue, and moral witness. This ethical posture gives the project enduring relevance as a model of reconciliatory pedagogy.

Despite its intellectual depth and ethical promise, *Medresetü'z-Zehra* was never fully realised. The socio-political environment of early Republican Turkey proved inhospitable to initiatives that bore religious or regional character. Nursi's proposal, initially submitted to the Ottoman Parliament before the empire's fall, received nominal support but was overtaken by the turmoil of World War I and the subsequent collapse of the state. In the Republican era, any project grounded in Islamic epistemology or Kurdish cultural affirmation was perceived as subversive, if not outright treasonous. Nursi's growing influence and his refusal to align with the secular regime led to his exile and surveillance by the state (Vahide, 2005).

The centralisation of education under the *Tevhid-i Tedrisat* law of 1924 left little room for independent institutions that deviated from the official ideology. Religious education was relegated to state-sanctioned Imam Hatip schools, which were tightly controlled and stripped of their former autonomy. Furthermore, the stigmatisation of Nursi as a "reactionary" figure within the secular nationalist narrative hindered the public legitimacy of his proposals. Though he explicitly rejected armed resistance and called for moral and educational reform, Nursi was repeatedly imprisoned and exiled, and his followers were monitored under

suspicion. These repressive measures suppressed his initiatives and shaped the reception of his ideas, delaying their influence until the gradual liberalisation of Turkish political and religious discourse in the late 20th century.

Nevertheless, the unrealised status of *Medresetü'z-Zehra* should not be interpreted as a failure. On the contrary, its enduring conceptual legacy—preserved in the *Risale-i Nur* and revitalised by contemporary scholars and institutions—testifies to the resilience of ideas rooted in integrity and vision. The project's unrealization resulted from conceptual inadequacy and a political climate that could not tolerate multiplicity. In this sense, *Medresetü'z-Zehra* remains a symbol of suppressed potential and ongoing relevance—a light obscured but not extinguished.

Contemporary and Comparative Relevance

When viewed through a postcolonial lens, *Medresetü'z-Zehra* shares with other reformist Islamic educational movements—such as Aligarh in British India, Pesantren Gontor in Indonesia, and Al-Azhar's reforms in Egypt—the ambition to reconcile Islamic tradition with the exigencies of modernity. All these movements emerged under the pressures of colonial domination or its aftermath, attempting to revitalize Islamic education amid confusion. However, while figures like Sir Syed Ahmad Khan at Aligarh leaned heavily toward Western paradigms to secure Muslim survival, often at the cost of cultural alienation, and while state politics frequently constrained Al-Azhar's reforms, Nursi envisioned an integrative path where modern sciences and religious knowledge could coexist without subsuming Islamic epistemology to colonial categories.

Unlike Gontor, which developed in a postcolonial setting where Islamic identity was constitutionally protected, Nursi's project unfolded in a hostile secular-nationalist environment, making *Medresetü'z-Zehra* less a project of state-sanctioned reform than an act of epistemic resistance. Its originality is refusing the binary between tradition and modernity, proposing a critical renewal rooted in indigenous Islamic thought instead. In doing so, Nursi anticipated broader postcolonial critiques that resist mimetic adoption of Western modernity, offering a decolonial educational vision rooted in spiritual sovereignty and moral agency instead.

Looking across these different reform movements, it becomes clear that *Medresetü'z-Zehra* was not just a product of its time, but a vision that speaks beyond it. Nursi's approach—rooted in faith yet open to reason, protective of tradition yet welcoming to new knowledge—offered a way to navigate the rugged terrain between old and new, local and global. Today, his ideas feel surprisingly fresh as Muslim societies wrestle with similar tensions. Rather than viewing *Medresetü'z-Zehra* as a historical curiosity, it makes more sense to see it as an

unfinished conversation that still has much to offer to the urgent questions of education, identity, and coexistence in the twenty-first century.

The vision of *Medresetü'z-Zehra* remains deeply relevant in contemporary Muslim societies facing the dual challenge of sustaining religious authenticity while embracing intellectual pluralism and cultural diversity. Nursi's model offers a middle path in an age marked by increasing polarisation between secularism and religiosity, centralism and localism, tradition and innovation. His commitment to integrating knowledge, affirming linguistic diversity, and promoting moral reasoning anticipates many of the core concerns of twenty-first-century education, particularly in multicultural contexts.

In countries such as Indonesia, Nigeria, and Lebanon, where religious, ethnic, and linguistic diversity forms an integral part of everyday life, Nursi's approach to education offers an important model. Rather than trying to suppress differences, his vision shows how plurality can be embraced and guided toward building a shared foundation of moral and ethical values. His trilingual model supports mother tongues in early education while promoting broader communicative skills essential for civic participation. Research shows that such multilingual practices enhance cognitive development and foster greater social empathy, reflecting contemporary pedagogical insights and the ethical principles embedded in the Islamic tradition.

Furthermore, in postcolonial Muslim contexts still struggling with the legacy of Western educational dominance, *Medresetü'z-Zehra* offers a paradigm for epistemic decolonisation. It calls for educational models that neither reject modern science nor reduce Islamic tradition to dogma but instead cultivate critical engagement and spiritual depth. In this sense, Nursi's vision speaks directly to ongoing efforts in Islamic pedagogy, knowledge integration, and curriculum reform.

Perhaps most importantly, Nursi's model reframes education as a reconciliation between identities, worldviews, and communities. It challenges educators, policymakers, and religious leaders to move beyond exclusionary paradigms and toward institutions that heal rather than divide. In a world increasingly fractured by ideological rigidity and cultural anxiety, *Medresetü'z-Zehra* reminds us that the future of education lies not in conformity but in principled coexistence.

5. Conclusion

The *Medresetü'z-Zehra* project, as envisioned by Said Nursi, represents a profound response to the sociopolitical fragmentation and epistemological dislocation that characterised the late Ottoman and early Republican periods in Turkey. Amid the bifurcation of knowledge systems initiated during the *Tanzimat* era and exacerbated by the homogenising policies of the modern Turkish Republic, Nursi proposed an educational paradigm that reconciled sacred tradition with modern scientific inquiry,

religious devotion with rational thought, and ethnolinguistic diversity with national cohesion.

More than a mere institutional proposal, *Medresetü'z-Zehra* was a visionary blueprint for civilisational renewal grounded in the unity of knowledge (*wahdat al-'ilm*), moral cultivation, and inclusive pedagogy. It aimed to heal the epistemic rupture between the mekteb and the madrasa, and to revitalise the integrative legacy of Islamic education through a tripartite curriculum that blended religious sciences, rational disciplines, and spiritual ethics. In this model, knowledge is not compartmentalised but harmonised—each discipline illuminating different aspects of divine truth.

Situated near the Kurdish heartlands, the trilingual structure of the proposed institution (Arabic, Turkish, Kurdish) also challenged the nationalist assimilation policies of the early Republic. By affirming local languages and cultures within a unifying Islamic framework, *Medresetü'z-Zehra* offered a reconciliatory model of citizenship rooted in shared moral values rather than ethnic uniformity. It exemplified an educational resistance that sought transformation through political confrontation, intellectual empowerment, and ethical formation.

Though the institution was never actualised due to political repression and ideological constraints, its conceptual legacy endures. *Medresetü'z-Zehra* remains a symbol of education as a vehicle for social healing, epistemic integration, and pluralistic unity. In an age still marked by polarisation, cultural marginalisation, and the fragmentation of knowledge, Nursi's vision stands as a compelling alternative, offering a framework in which education becomes a bridge between communities, a sanctuary for dignity, and a path to comprehensive human flourishing.

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Dhita Ayomi Purwaningtyas dan M. Yemmardatillah: *Medresetü'z-Zehra: Bediuzzaman Said...*

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