

# The Relations between Islam and Secularism: The Impact on Social Behavior in Turkey

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Received: February 29, 2016

Accepted: March 31, 2016

Online Published: July 26, 2016

doi:10.5539/ies.v9n8p66

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ies.v9n8p66>

## Abstract

Secularism as central to society and human life may bring undesired negative consequences in Muslim societies. Increasing social problems among juveniles in Turkey raised questions regarding the right personality development and education of young people. In extending further analysis, we conducted semi-structured interview with experts to assess the level of Turkish personality and impact of Said Nursi, who is a very influential Islamic scholar in Turkish society and to the Islamic movement in general. This study implies that education integrated with Islamic belief and practice will be more influential to educate Turkish Muslims, rather than secular based teaching. This result will be a guideline for educationists and counselors. In future study, developing a personality scale integrated with belief and practice will be beneficial to Muslim communities.

**Keywords:** secularism, Islam, personality, Turkey, Said Nursi

## 1. Introduction

Although Islam and secularism are obviously opposite concepts, they might be some common issues to consider them as a similar. For example; there is no compulsory in Islam to use free will, everything is left to an individual's free will to choose the right and wrong path. Similarly, in secularism, it does not interfere a person religious choice, to some extent, freedom of religion and conscience fully depend on a person's choice. However, secularism as central to society and human life is in a position against Islamic values and practice (Al-Attas, 1993). Therefore, this may bring undesired negative consequences such as social problems and unrest in society, particularly in Muslim societies.

Through the establishment of the new Republic of Turkey in 1923, secularism gained importance (Yildiz, 2007). The new government started to use power increasingly to impose a secular system on Turkey's Muslim society (Walton, 2008). Through implementing branches of government and administration from Western countries, and a base of positivist progress, the purpose, in fact, was the creation of a modern Western-style secular state. Thus, Western culture and lifestyle were to become the way of life in Turkey. Although the new system of Western-style secular, particularly on the basis of culture, negatively affected the Islamic life in Turkey, Turkish Muslims still preserved their culture and identity within the framework of Islam for decades (Gole, 1997).

In fact, interpretation of secularism in Turkey appears as conflict; Olson (1985) argued that Turkish "secularism" is not the equivalent of American secularism, which includes the "separation of church and state". In fact, in Turkey, secularism serves to "disestablish" Islam, to limit its powers to "matters of belief and practice" (Mardin, 1990). Therefore, it negatively influenced all aspects of culture, state, personality, social behavior and society that had their roots in Islamic traditions.

For this article, the researchers systematically reviewed and evaluated the Turkish personality and social behavior interacted with secularism. In what follows, the authors draw conclusions from the review and interview protocol; discuss their implications for theory, practice, and research; and suggest future research that might help the other Muslim countries to completely figure out the social behavior. In this paper, the authors aim to articulate a systematic Islamic-based theory of belief and behavior, and use the ideas of Said Nursi, a well-known scholar in Turkey, as the departing point. The authors discuss the personality structures he identified (i.e., based on belief and practice), but thoroughly examine his basis of analysis. Using semantic and

hermeneutic, and qualitative methods of inquiry, the authors clarify the meanings and functions he proposed, while proposing some new ideas that stem from the arguments of the *Risale i Nur* (Nursi's writing collection of books). The ultimate goal of the present analysis is not only in delineating the possible meanings and functions of the concepts identified, but pointing to their intricate interrelations and dynamic interplay, and, eventually, integrating them into a detailed and coherent Nursi's theory of personality.

### *1.1 Social Problems and Secularism in Turkey*

In recent decades, incidents of social problems in Turkey have increased steeply, especially among younger Turkish, as reported by the *Turkiye Istatistik Kurumu-TUIK* (Turkish Statistical Institute) (2015). The number of juveniles received into security in 2014 increased 6.2% as compared to 2013. In fact, this number became 131,172 in 2014 while it was only 68,344 in 2009.

Those crimes common to all of the countries, such as assault, offences against family order, theft, robbery, kidnapping, and sexual crimes have been steadily increasing in Turkey over the past decade (TUIK, 2015). Particularly troubling is the nature of problems occurring among the Turkish Muslim young generation. Such social problems directly threaten the current and future direction of the nation, which in turn jeopardizes every other aspect of national importance including the growth that has made Turkey an economic success in the last two decades (The World Bank 2014). As the nation continues to move forward with its Vision 2023 plan (*Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi-AKP* (The Justice and Development Party), 2015), recently established by the Turkish government in 2012, the young generation today is in line to be the inheritors of a fully developed and modern Turkey. Because of the increasing level and alarming nature of a variety of social problems, however, the right personality development and education of young people, along with the future success of the entire nation, is in question (Donmez, 2007).

Furthermore, research (Kohut, 2008) shows that Islam in Turkey is as problematic in terms of the growing gap between belief and behavior. In reality, it is essentially a ritualized Islam that has very limited effect on one's moral conduct. There is a major gap between believing and behaving in Islam in Turkey. According to the study by Carkoglu and Toprak (2000), 86 percent of Turkish citizens regard themselves as believers; 84 percent regularly participate in *Jumua* rituals (Friday prayers); and 46 percent pray five times a day. Thus, the possible reason for this manner, as stated by Ansari (2009), that one of the important reasons of the weakness of practice Islam in Turkey might be sourced from the weakness of religious teaching. Due to this weakening, these caused to "deteriorate the life of Islam in Turkey" (Nursi, 1930/2003, p. 473).

In fact, Hood and colleagues (2009) highlighted the importance of religion factor on individual and society to decreased crime rates by stating "*when it comes to ethics, major world religions are amazingly consistent in their teachings about right and wrong. Religion has tremendous potential to improve our world by teaching an ethical system that would benefit all of us* (p. 381)." Therefore, religion factor as a culture to society is an influential element in spreading tolerance, helpfulness, and personal and interpersonal integrity, more particularly in maintaining the social order in society.

Vahide (2005) proposed a view that a secular, Western educational background which is generally overlooking of religious teaching; the negligent attitude toward the fundamental tenets of Islam was largely inapplicable in the Turkish system. Furthermore, she suggested that the idea of Nursi in the social life of Muslims and in the field of morality was the only way to maintain unity in Turkey. She pointed out that "*If religion was not taken as the basis, the non-Turkish Muslims of the religion would not feel true brotherhood for the Turks and the need for cooperation and solidarity at that time was great*" (p. 172). It is a unanimous view that secularism and nationalism is no longer working in Turkey. To some extent, these caused unresolved debate or conflict in society.

Some Muslim scholars in Turkey, more particularly Said Nursi (1876-1960) who realized the danger consequences of secularism to society and a person's life, worked hard to guide Muslim individuals in Turkey to strengthen their belief and practically follow up the teachings of Islam. Although he did not physically take any action against the secular Turkey government, he played a major role in preserving the identity of Muslims. For example; he started to write a collection of books, total fourteen books and booklets, namely the *Risale i Nur* in order to challenge the idea of secularism and to preserve the Islamic belief and practice because he argues that "*If one Muslim is out of circle of Islam, he or she turns into an apostate and anarchist and become a poison to the society*" (Nursi, 1944/1993, p. 544), Nursi, therefore, addressed the importance of Islamic teachings to Muslims, particularly in the context of belief and practice in order to continue social comfort and peace and avoid social problems such as anarchy and terror in society because if religion is not taught accordingly, it may create a miserable position for both society and person (e.g., internal conflict in eastern Turkey up to date).

On the other hand, Keyman (2007) highlighted that the issue of secularism in Turkey is not destructive, but just to “control and regulate religious activities through constitutional and institutional means, in order to establish a strict separation between the state and religion and “not to act ‘impartially’ towards different Muslim and non-Muslim religious communities” (p. 225). While this fact remains true in the constitutional and institutional context, Nursi and other researchers addressed the issue of lack of adequate religious institute or system to train the Muslim individuals and let them know their identity and to know the shared meanings among different Muslim nations. In fact, social conflict clearly might be an indicator of weakness of the religious institute since those Turks involved in social conflict are Muslim individuals of different nations. Therefore, the conflict of Muslim identity results in social problems, especially to produce terror and anarchy in Turkey. This is clear to lead to complicated and unpredictable results.

Extending the meaning of secularism in Turkey, it literally carries the same meaning with universal understanding, Nursi (1948/1999) stated that “*secularism means being unbiased; that is, in accordance with the principle of freedom of conscience, it refers to a government that does not interfere with religiously-minded and pious people, the same as it does not interfere with the irreligious and dissolute*” (p. 305). While this is ultimately true, there were oppositely some rules and regulations occurred as such banning wearing of the headscarf, limited religious learning, and the other opposite practices were implemented such as Muslim scholars and particularly Nursi, stating in his book “*A certain proof of how far this is from the essence of justice is that although according to the principles of freedom of thought and freedom of study it is not considered a crime to read the harmful works of Doctor Dozy and other atheists hostile to Islam, it is counted a crime for those people needy for the truths of the Qur’an and belief to read and write out the Risale i Nur, which teaches those truths as brilliantly as the sun* (1948/1999, p. 302). While these acts in favour of secularism gradually continued up to the early 21st century in Turkey, the teachings of Islam always remained neglected and were not paid attention well. Therefore, the issue here is that there is lacking in teaching and training Muslim individuals with their own religious knowledge. And this happened although it is important for Muslim to know their identity and culture in a proper manner, according to Nursi. Consistently he highlighted that “*the politicians who govern in Asia, where the prophets appeared, will not, and cannot, ban taqwa and good works, which for a thousand years have been as essential for this nation as food and medicine*” (1948/1998, p. 378).

### 1.2 Said Nursi’s Contribution to Belief and Practice

In many ways a distinctive figure, Said Nursi (1876-1960) was an innovative theologian and scholar whose important contributions to contemporary Islamic thought in Turkey are now being acknowledged in the Islamic world, but are still relatively unknown in the West. Furthermore, his contribution to building of Islamic personality and vision in Turkey (Hassan, 2014) is greatly unique. In addition, Nursi played a major role in revitalizing and preserving the Islamic faith in Turkey in the very difficult days of Turkish history when banning Qur’an recitation and forbidding wearing of Islamic attire had occurred (Fawaz, 1992; Vahide, 2007). The newly developed scale of Integrative Islamic Personality Inventory (IIPI) (Ismail & Tekke, 2015) was recently developed in accordance with the idea of Nursi.

The most important achievement of Nursi was to bring back the way of expounding the teachings of the Qur’an on the truths of belief that integrates the traditional Islamic sciences and modern scientific knowledge. In his writings, he developed a movement for renewal of faith/belief that is almost unique in the Islamic world (Vahide 2003). Thus, his purpose was to analyze both belief and unbelief and to determine through clearly reasoned arguments that it is possible, through following the method of the Quran, to prove that all the truths of existence, the universe and human have rational explanations (Ansari, 2009).

Nursi’s contributions were primarily in the field of Qur’anic interpretation and consisted of the body of work, called the Risale i Nur which refers to the Qur’an and Sunnah (Vahide, 2003). A peak example of Nursi’s style of origination is the style of Qur’an commentary (tafseer) as embedded in the Risale i Nur. The teaching of Risale i Nur presents an attractive and rich view to benefit of understanding religion in the modern world and figuring out how ideas can go beyond their immediate historical and social contexts (Eickelman, 2003). Nursi’s concentrating on writing treatises began with the establishment of the new Turkish Republic. To some extent, materialism and secularism intensely disturb the root of Islam (Walton, 2008) with new revolutions in Turkey. Nursi was deeply concerned with the challenges of strengthening and preserving of belief in God, which for him was a fundamental fact of religion and the basis for holding Muslim society together. Therefore, Nursi followed the way of investigation and conviction by concentrating to write the modern Islamic commentary of the Qur’an in order to strengthen the faith of Muslims against thoughts and ideas raised by materialism and secularism (Turner & Korkunc, 2009).

His teachings on belief begins with mainly explaining to modern man the basic tenets of the Quran, for example; the unity of Allah, Prophethood, the existence of the hereafter and worship—in such a way that both intellect and heart are convinced. In *Risale i Nur*, these truths provide the true answer to the existential dilemma facing all human beings currently: Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going? Nurturing of belief was the antidote to the problem which man confronts in life, as argued by Nursi (Turner & Korkunc, 2009).

Furthermore, *Risale i Nur* proves the most difficult questions which even the greatest scholar did not explain in detail, such as “*divine determining (destiny), bodily resurrection, man’s will, and many other mysteries, such as the constant change in the universe, the talisman of the universe man’s ego, and the transformation of particles*” (Nursi 1930/2003, pp. 438-439). In other words, *Risale i Nur* offers a scientific and reasonable explanation of Islam that is relevant to twentieth-century human, addressing both intellect and other inner faculties, and answering the needs of people in the religion at this time. Those engaged with truths of *Risale i Nur* are gaining the strong belief, stated by Nursi that for those who follow the method of the *Risale i Nur* becomes a vital, ongoing process, progressing through its innumerable degrees of certainty.

Nursi continuously encouraged his students in striving to publish the truths of belief. He even impressed that writing *Risale i Nur* in that time is more important than the greatest of other matters. These writing of Said Nursi reached many people who became followers of *Risale i Nur* and formed the *Risale i Nur* movement in Turkey and in the world. This movement basically fights against unbelief and secularism by proclaiming the belief in God and practice of Islam. Moreover, its successful method of “positive action” laid the basis of Islamic revival that has been observed in Turkey in recent years (Saritoprak, 2008). In this study, I address the contribution of Nursi to reconstructing belief for spiritual improvement and to follow the teachings of Islam as for religiosity.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Participants

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with all four academics, who are currently teaching university subjects. Two of them are in the field of Islamic related studies, one of them is specialized in engineering and the other one is expert in biology. Though the latter two interviewees seem different fields, they are actively playing a role in *Risale i Nur* organizations. Origin countries of four academics are Malaysia, Turkey, and Algeria. Three of them teach in Malaysian universities, and one of them works in Turkey University.

### 2.2 Research Design

Interviews are viewed as a useful way of investigating the core aspects of a subject’s story. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2000) stated that interviews allow subjects “to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and express how they regard a situation from their own point of view.” With this reasoning, the researchers administered the semi-structured interviews with four academics, who have the knowledge of Turkey, Said Nursi, and Turkish culture and people. This is to ensure that the researchers have a firm grasp of the knowledge to evaluate the personalities that are relevant to the study. It is called as an interpretive/practical interview (Suryani, 2008), in order to understand interviewees’ unique ways of explanation for the purpose of the study.

As for ethical considerations, the voluntary nature of the participation was clearly stated prior to distributing the scale. With their permission, the interviews were audio-recorded using a digital voice recorder. In the interview protocol, items such as demographic background and seven general open-ended questions are included. Questions related to personality and their purposes together are shown in Table 1. These interviews were qualitatively analyzed.

Table 1. Interview questions and main purposes

No	Interview Questions	Main Purpose
1	What is the philosophy of Said Nursi's teachings in his books?	To figure out the outline of Nursi's teachings
2	What is your understanding of personality?	To know the understanding of personality
3	Do you see relationship between Nursi's teachings and development of human personality?	To grasp the relation between Nursi's teachings and personality
4	What topics of <i>Risale i Nur</i> are relevant to human personality?	To learn the specific topic of Nursi's writing referring to personality
5	How do you find or examine the personality of Turkish people, considering following aspects? One is secular/Liberal Turkish -Second is conservative/Asian Turkish	To figure out the main differences of these two groups in Turkey
6	Do you find Turkish culture deeply imbedded in writings of Said Nursi?	To acquire Nursi's writings integrated with Turkish culture
7	What is the implication of writing of Said Nursi for development of Turkish personality?	To discover further Nursi's contribution to Turkish personality and culture

The interview also featured questions related to the participants' knowledge, interest, concerns, and different aspects of the deliberate integration of faith and personality. Academics were questioned on what they knew about the view of Said Nursi with regard to Turkish personality. They explained their ideas on curricular versus extracurricular integration. Interviewees were encouraged to explain the relationship they found between the mission of Said Nursi and the integration of personality of Turkish. Another aspect of the interview dealt with academicians' perceptions of the Islamic principles and values they observe in Turkey, and with the methods they realize to integrate personality in Said Nursi's influence. I also questioned to what extent they have been able to understand this ideal, asking for concrete details such as culture, lifestyle, western psychology, Nursi's teaching and peoples' perspective. Academics were also encouraged to share their valuable experiences and perceptions, and finally to provide suggestions on how society in Turkey can be improved in order to enhance Islamic understanding.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Analysis

The interviews were audio-recorded, then transcribed into narrative texts. The data were thus coded by carefully reading the transcripts looking for significant statements reflecting the participant's experiences and other issues related to Islamic personality. The researchers used coding as the process of segmenting and labeling text to form descriptions in the data, which were then transferred into the coding template as shown in Table 2. The main ideas were summarily identified by critical analysis of the discourses.

Table 2. Main Idea and Its Elaboration

Main Idea	Elaboration-Verbal Example to Support the Main Idea
Faith in God	Philosophy of Nursi summarizes maybe ... In three or four things. Number one meaningful letter, means Tawhidic (Divine unity) approach, tawhid vision of life, means Islam or religion or ustadul (leader of) Qur'an. To develop strong iman (faith).
Building a religious nation	to raise generation having faith and iman
Spiritually and dynamically closing to God	living spiritual meaning and faith meaning and social meaning, ... you know, ..close relations to Allah well, it is very different, well integrative concept of personality.
Impact of secularism	new generation, particularly western education based, no religious and morality education. We forgot our relationship with our ancestors, unfortunately, that is why Risale i Nur brought us bridge to past and our ancestor, for example we can't read the writings of the stone of our grandfather's graveyard.
Islamic movement	even although Turkey is secular country, by nature, and by fitrah (nature), Turkish people are religious people
Sincerity/sacrifice	they are very active in.. in the service of Islam. sacrificing the life,
Hospitality culture	they are kind people

The analysis of the interviews pointed to major conclusions on personality; first, Islam seems to be related to almost every domain in Muslims' lives; second, morality and ethical conduct and practice of Islam and Islamic universality (viewing every Muslim in the world as a brother or sister, identifying with every Muslim) are dominant in Turkish people personality especially. Finally, the Turkish people are expressing Islamic identity such as praying and following Islamic teaching; on the other hand, they are supporting the secular way of life (i.e., political system). Thus, the interviewee labels them as "normal secular" as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Main idea and Turkish personality

Main Idea	Turkish Personality Through Interview
Faith in God	1-spiritual, 2-believer
Building a religious nation	1-conservative Muslim Turkish four types; a-Sufism followers, b-Risale i Nur followers, c-Conservative-based party supporters, d-ordinary Muslims (normal secular)
Spiritually and dynamically closing to God	devotion to God, 2-obedience
Impact of secularism	1-Secular Turkish: a-Armani Christian followers, b-Jewish followers, c-Alevi followers, d-Anti-Islam groups
Islamic movement	1-Islamic leadership, 2-heroism, 3-compassionate, 4-honorship
Sincerity/sacrifice	1-harmonic, 2-positive, 3-dedicated
Hospitality culture	1-respect, 2-hospitality, 3-concern, 4-cleanliness, 5-generous, 6-steadfast

#### 4. Discussion

While Turkish Muslims seem to be secular in this concept, they are able to preserve Islamic values in their daily life. Considering increased social problems among Turkish Muslims, education needs to be revised to be more integrated with Islamic belief and practice. Realizing this gap in the existing literature, the aim of this research was to investigate the source of social problems in a Muslim country. Nursi's idea and interview result show that the factor of secularism might be the main negative reason on religious education of Turkish Muslims' behaviors, upon Nursi statement of "if one Muslim is out of circle of Islam, he or she turns into an apostate and anarchist and become a poison to the society." (1944/1993, p. 544).

Congruently, Nursi underlines in his book of Rays that “*But without religious education, Muslims cannot be governed except by means of absolute despotism and absolute bribery*” (1948/1999, p. 513). Also other Islamic scholars such as Al-Ghazali (1997) and Nabhani (1960) emphasized the importance of religious education for nurturing the spiritual aspect of Muslim individuals. In the case of Turkey and many Muslim societies, the gap has created uncertainty as to how Islamic personality affects the greater good and well-being of the nation. Today, it is largely agreed that a multidimensional approach to deal with measuring personality is preferred. With this reasoning, the theoretical framework of this study is basically centered on Nursi’s idea on social behavior so that Islamic perspective to human personality using the view of Said Nursi on Turkish youth is exploited respectively. The reason of the view of Nursi is that integrated Islamic ideas have been significantly impressive sources for understanding the Turkish personality.

In this regard, the works of Said Nursi in his book of *Risale i Nur* are the best to identify the Islamic worldview on personality. *Risale i Nur* has been widely known to influence Turkish society (Yavuz, 1998). This has been elaborated in detail by Mardin (1989), a prominent Turkish sociologist, in his book, “*Religion and Social Change in Turkey: The Case of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*”. Mardin suggests that Nursi’s influence must be understood in the context of a global revolution in social communications, often termed “modernization,” which originated in Europe and spread to the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century. Although Turkey has accommodated a wide range of Western practices and values, as well as applying a secular democracy that is unique among Muslim cultures, it cannot be forgotten that 99 percent of the population is Muslim and that Islamic identity still has an essential impact on all facets of life in Turkey (Arslan, 2000; Yavuz, 2004).

Consistent with the claim of this study, rigorous, systematic and large-scale scientific psychological research on Muslim nations is needed to figure out the growing social problems respectively. In order to address this problem, a comprehensive study covering Muslim societies is needed. Most important is the disparity in the fundamental understanding on the concept of personality itself, compared to the Islamic notion of personality (Haque, 2004). For example, the vast majority of personality measurements are grounded in a secular view, which treats religion in a manner that isolates it from life’s daily affairs. Islam, on the other hand, does not concede to the secular dichotomy of the sacred and the profane. Rather, the worldview of Islam projects a view of reality and truth that encompasses existence and life altogether in total perspective whose fundamental elements are permanently established (Al-Attas, 2001). This basic difference between the two worldviews has dramatic consequences for the conceptualization of personality culminating in personality measurements with fundamentally different understanding of what it means to be a good person. Understandably, therefore, personality dimensions extracted from differing underlying worldviews undoubtedly differ according to the extent to which each worldview is manifested in daily religious life and practice.

Finally, this article successfully limited the growing problem of Muslim individuals in Turkey, integrated with secular based education and its practical results are essentially significant to investigate in depth. As a result of this investigation, teaching of Islam and such value system to the Muslim individuals help their personality improve better and benefit society. In addition, developing such related personality measurement through Islamic understanding will result in an influential personality scale more reflective of the Islamic personality. Of course, other factors of ethnic, language and society will be interesting to evaluate to get an overall picture of social problems occurring in Turkey. It is suggested to further analyze within different cultures for the other Muslim nations to identify whether administering an Islamic-based system might have similar effect in alleviating social problems. In addition, by implementing a relevant and organic concept of Islamic personality, coupled with a comprehensive instrument for measuring it, a baseline understanding of Islamic personality in Muslim societies, especially the young, can be achieved according to specific groups (i.e., university students and youth at large). To date, no known studies have been undertaken attempting to identify the Islamic personality for Turkish Muslims. Such adaptation and review study, however, can provide a starting point toward a greater understanding of the current and potential role of Muslims in Turkey, along with important areas for intervention and Islamic enhancement. This study shows that the Islamic based model of belief and practice is very beneficial to consider among Turkish Muslims, rather than following the secular based model which jeopardized Islamic life and culture.

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