

RECLAIMING EPISTEMIC UNITY THROUGH INTEGRATIVE SCIENTIFIC EDUCATION IN BEDIÜZZAMAN SAID NURSI'S MEDRESETÜ'Z-ZEHRA

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Abstract

This article explores Bediüzzaman Said Nursi's vision of Medresetü'z-Zehra as a paradigm of integrative scientific education rooted in Islamic metaphysics and decolonial epistemology. Situated in the intellectual and political turmoil of late Ottoman and early Republican Turkey, Nursi's educational proposal responds to the epistemic rupture caused by the secular-religious dualism imposed by Western modernity. Based on Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas's theory of Islamization of knowledge and Edward Said's critique of Western epistemic dominance, the article situates Medresetü'z-Zehra as a theological and postcolonial intervention. The research method used was qualitative with a hermeneutic approach. The results showed that Nursi's educational model repositions scientific knowledge, especially rational and empirical disciplines, as spiritually meaningful when integrated with religious and humanistic sciences under the ontological unity of *tawhîd*, seeking to produce scholars (*'âlim-rabbānî*) who are intellectually integrated, morally anchored, and spiritually awakened. The analysis shows that Medresetü'z-Zehra is historically significant and remains a vital reference point for contemporary Islamic educational reform amid ongoing crises of identity, ethics, and epistemological fragmentation.

Abstrak

Artikel ini menelaah gagasan Bediüzzaman Said Nursi tentang Medresetü'z-Zehra sebagai sebuah paradigma pendidikan ilmu yang integratif, berakar pada metafisika Islam dan epistemologi dekolonial. Berada dalam konteks gejolak intelektual dan politik pada akhir era Utsmani dan awal Republik Turki, tawaran pendidikan Nursi hadir sebagai respons terhadap keretakan ilmu pengetahuan yang dipicu oleh dualisme sekuler-religius yang dibentuk oleh modernitas Barat. Dengan bertumpu pada teori Islamisasi ilmu pengetahuan Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas serta kritik Edward Said terhadap dominasi epistemik Barat, artikel ini memposisikan Medresetü'z-Zehra sebagai sebuah intervensi teologis sekaligus pascakolonial. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah kualitatif dengan pendekatan hermeneutika. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa model

pendidikan Nursi menempatkan kembali ilmu pengetahuan, khususnya disiplin rasional dan empiris, sebagai sesuatu yang bernilai spiritual ketika dipadukan dengan ilmu-ilmu keagamaan dan kemanusiaan dalam kerangka kesatuan ontologis tawḥīd. Upaya tersebut diarahkan untuk melahirkan pada intelek (‘ālim-rabbānī) yang memiliki integrasi intelektual, keteguhan moral, dan kesadaran spiritual. Analisis ini menunjukkan bahwa Medresetü’z-Zehra memiliki signifikansi historis dan tetap menjadi rujukan penting bagi reformasi pendidikan Islam kontemporer di tengah krisis identitas, etika, dan fragmentasi epistemologis yang terus berlanjut

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Introduction

The intersection of Islamic tradition, colonial modernity, and epistemological transformation has profoundly shaped the educational trajectory of the Muslim world. In the late Ottoman and early Republican Turkish context, this transformation manifested through the forced bifurcation of knowledge systems between the religious and the secular, the spiritual and the rational, the *medrese* and the modern school. This rupture was not merely institutional, but epistemic: it created a dislocation in the Muslim mind regarding the unity of truth and the sacred purposes of knowledge.¹ Within this historical juncture, Bediüzzaman Said Nursi (1876–1960) emerged as a formidable intellectual figure who sought to overcome this fragmentation through an integrative educational philosophy.²

Nursi's proposal of *Medresetü'z-Zebra*, a university-like institution, was not simply an administrative or curricular innovation. It represented a fundamental response to the colonial and secular influences that had uprooted Islamic knowledge from its spiritual and moral foundation. Nursi envisioned an educational model that would synthesize religious sciences (*'ulūm al-dīniyyah*), rational sciences (*'ulūm al-'aqliyyah*), and human sciences (*'ulūm al-insāniyyah*) under the ontological framework of *tamhīd*.³

This article analyzes the structure, philosophical basis, and ongoing relevance of *Medresetü'z-Zebra* using two theoretical lenses: Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas's Islamization of Knowledge and Edward Said's Postcolonial Epistemology. Al-Attas provides the metaphysical foundation for understanding Nursi's critique of value-neutral secular education, emphasizing that knowledge in Islam must lead to *'adalab*, *ḥikmah*, and *ma'rifah*.⁴ At the same time, Said's insights on Orientalism and epistemic domination situate Nursi's project as a form of intellectual resistance and decolonization, reclaiming Islamic intellectual sovereignty from the hegemonic paradigms of Western modernity.⁵ By integrating these frameworks, the study positions *Medresetü'z-Zebra* as a theological, ethical, and decolonial response to the modern condition by offering a comprehensive model for Islamic educational renewal in the post-imperial age.

Previous scholarship on Said Nursi has thoroughly explored his contributions to spiritual education, moral formation, and integrating Islamic

¹ Umut Azak, *Islam and Secularism in Turkey: Kemalism, Religion and the Nation State* (New York: I.B.Tauris, 2010).

² Sükran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005).

³ Ahmad Siddiq, "Badi'uzzaman Said Nursi on Philosophy of Education and Its Implications for the Muadalah Pesantren Model in Indonesia," *Tasfiyah: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam* 5, no. 2 (2021): 227, <https://doi.org/10.21111/tasfiyah.v5i2.6439>.

⁴ Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam: A Framework for an Islamic Philosophy of Education* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1980).

⁵ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

sciences with modern knowledge.⁶ Relatively little attention has been given to his vision of scientific education as a metaphysical integration and ethical formation domain. Most existing literature tends to emphasize the general harmony between *dīnī* and modern knowledge systems without unpacking how Nursi sought to reclaim rational and empirical sciences within a Qur'anic epistemology grounded in *tanḥīd*. Moreover, while studies like those of Ayathurrahman & Shodiq⁷ and Ihsan et al.⁸ affirm the relevance of Nursi's thought for curriculum reform, they lack a robust theoretical engagement with scientific education's ontological and epistemological stakes.

This article fills that gap by focusing on integrative scientific education as conceptualized in *Medresetü'z-Zebra*, interpreted through the dual frameworks of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas's Islamization of Knowledge and Edward Said's Postcolonial Epistemology. It positions Nursi's educational model not merely as a reformist curriculum but as a decolonial epistemic intervention that challenges the secular construction of science as value-neutral and spiritually detached. By foregrounding the role of scientific disciplines as rational and devotional pursuits, this article offers a novel reading of *Medresetü'z-Zebra* as a spiritual laboratory for re-sacralizing modern knowledge. It contributes to Islamic educational theory and broader conversations on postcolonial education and epistemic sovereignty in the Muslim world.

This article focuses specifically on Nursi's attempt to rehabilitate scientific education through an integrative epistemology grounded in *tanḥīd*. In contrast to colonial and secular models that isolated science from metaphysical meaning, Nursi envisioned scientific disciplines, such as logic, astronomy, and biology, not as autonomous fields but as pathways to spiritual insight. His proposed university, *Medresetü'z-Zebra*, thus aimed to reclaim science as a domain of rational investigation and divine remembrance.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and hermeneutical research design to analyze Bediüzzaman Said Nursi's conceptualization of integrative scientific education within the framework of *Medresetü'z-Zebra*. As a historical-theoretical inquiry, the methodology combined textual content analysis with comparative-historical analysis to uncover the epistemological foundations,

⁶ Siddiq, "Badi'uzzaman Said Nursi on Philosophy of Education and Its Implications for the Muadalah Pesantren Model in Indonesia."

⁷ Himmawan Ayathurrahman and Sadam Fajar Shodiq, "Integrasi Ilmu Agama-Sains Badiuzzaman Said Nursi Dan Relevansinya Dengan Pendidikan Agama Islam Era Digital Di Indonesia," *Bulletin of Indonesian Islamic Studies* 2, no. 1 (2023): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.51214/biis.v2i1.512>.

⁸ Nur Hadi Ihsan, Hasanah Purnamasari, and Dhita Ayomi Purwaningtyas, "Said Nursi Education Concept: Integration of Spiritual, Intellectual, and Moral Dimensions," *Muaddib: Studi Kependidikan Dan Keislaman* 11, no. 01 (2021): 76–87.

curricular structure, and contemporary relevance of Nursi's vision.⁹ The primary data set consisted of selected treatises from the *Risale-i Nur* corpus, particularly *The Words*, *The Flashes*, and *Munāẓarāt*, which explicitly engage themes of knowledge (*ʿilm*), scientific inquiry (*ʿulum*), spiritual formation (*taqwā*), and the unity of knowledge (*tawḥīd*). These texts were purposively selected based on their direct relevance to education and epistemology. Secondary sources included Nursi's biographical works, archival documents from the late Ottoman and early Turkish Republican period, and contemporary scholarship on Islamic educational integration. To contextualize the analysis, the study also incorporated comparative data from two historically influential Islamic academic institutions.

Data analysis proceeded in four stages. First, primary texts were segmented into meaningful units through open coding based on thematic relevance, such as *ma'nā ḥarfī*, the integration of religious and rational sciences, and curriculum structure.¹⁰ Second, axial coding was conducted to identify relationships among themes, focusing on how Nursi linked scientific knowledge with metaphysical principles.¹¹ Third, selective coding was employed to synthesize emerging themes, which were interpreted through the dual theoretical frameworks of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas's Islamization of Knowledge and Edward Said's postcolonial epistemology (Said 1978). Finally, findings were triangulated through a comparative analysis with secondary literature and cross-referenced with the educational models of al-Azhar and Gontor to enhance analytical depth.

Several strategies were adopted to ensure validity. Source triangulation was conducted by integrating multiple primary and secondary sources, and peer debriefing among the co-authors was employed at each coding stage to minimize interpretive bias. Thick description was provided to allow readers to evaluate the credibility of interpretations.¹² This methodological approach does not aim at statistical generalization but theoretical generalization, offering a comprehensive account of how Nursi's vision contributes to contemporary debates on Islamic epistemology and educational integration

Result

The Dualism and the Solution of Said Nursi's Vision

The educational landscape during the late Ottoman Empire and the early Turkish Republic was marked by epistemic division and ideological tension. In the late nineteenth century, the *Tanzimat* reforms introduced Western-style secular

⁹ Virginia Braun, Victoria Clarke, and Debra Gray, *Collecting Qualitative Data* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4842-5596-4_7.

¹⁰ Braun, Clarke, and Gray.

¹¹ Necati Aydin, *Said Nursi and Science in Islam: Character Building through Nursi's Mana-i Harfi* (London: Routledge, 2019).

¹² John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (California: Sage Publications, 2018).

schools (*mektep*) aimed at shaping bureaucratic and military elites in line with European rationalist and materialist ideals. These institutions existed alongside traditional Islamic *medrese*, maintaining classical curricula based on the Qur'an, *ḥadīth*, *fiqh*, and *kalām*.¹³ This dual system created a sharp divide in the intellectual foundations of Muslim education. While the *medrese* upheld religious orthodoxy, the new secular schools prioritized scientific empiricism, often stripped of theological and metaphysical depth.

The founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923 intensified the existing divide between religious and secular knowledge into a state of open conflict. The Kemalist regime introduced a forceful secularization agenda aimed at removing religion entirely from the public and educational spheres. Measures such as shutting down *medrese*, replacing the Arabic script with Latin, and placing religious discourse under the control of the state institution *Dîyanet* all contributed to what Kezer terms an epistemic erasure, a systematic removal of Islam from the intellectual and cultural life of the nation.¹⁴ Education, in particular, became a key to this ideological struggle, where religion was reframed as superstition and modern science was positioned as the only legitimate source of knowledge.¹⁵ The Kemalist reforms reflect what Edward Said described as Orientalism: the internalization of Western epistemic superiority and the marginalization of indigenous knowledge traditions.¹⁶

Said Nursi stood out as a dissenting voice in this context. He rejected both the stagnation of traditionalism based on *taqlid* and the alienation produced by secularist modernity. He saw the compartmentalization of knowledge, into religious versus scientific, sacred versus profane, as an epistemological rupture that undermined intellectual integrity and spiritual development. In response, Nursi articulated a vision of integrative education grounded in the *tawḥīdī* ontology of Islam, wherein all forms of knowledge ultimately point to the Oneness of God. This vision crystallized in his proposal for *Medresetü'z-Zebra*, a university-like institution intended to unify *ulūm al-dīn* (religious sciences), *ulūm al-'aqlīyah* (rational sciences), and *ulūm al-insāniyah* (human sciences) under a harmonized epistemological framework.¹⁷

¹³ Serif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989).

¹⁴ Zeynep Kezer, *Building Modern Turkey: State, Space, and Ideology in the Early Republic* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015).

¹⁵ Azak, *Islam and Secularism in Turkey: Kemalism, Religion and the Nation State*.

¹⁶ Said, *Orientalism*.

¹⁷ Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi*.

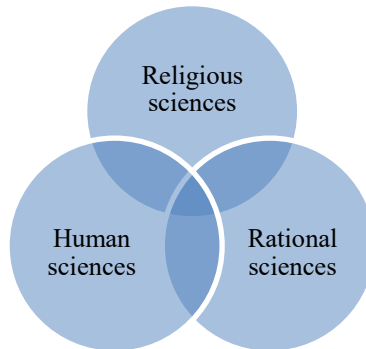
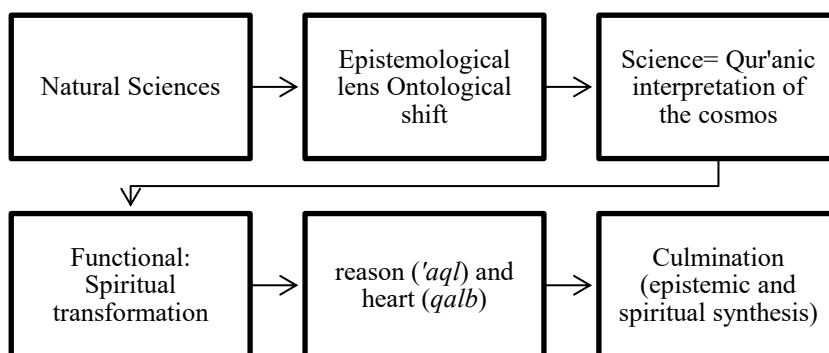


Figure 1. Unity of Epistemological Framework

A cornerstone of Nursi's epistemology is the concept of *ma'nā ḥarfī* (the indicative or relational meaning), which he contrasts with *ma'nā ismī* (the nominal or self-referential meaning). In Nursi's hermeneutic paradigm, phenomena in the natural world, ranging from atoms to galaxies, possess a *ma'nā ḥarfī* in that they signify realities beyond themselves: they are signs (*āyāt*) that point to the Divine. As he writes in *The Words*:

"All things, through the aspect of their ma'nā ḥarfī, are mirrors of the Divine Names; they are not independent, self-existing beings with self-contained meanings".¹⁸

According to Nursi, scientific knowledge that ignores its more profound symbolic significance loses its spiritual value. In contrast, when the natural sciences are viewed through the concept of *ma'nā ḥarfī*, which sees all created things as signs pointing to the Divine, they become a kind of tafsīr, or an interpretation of the universe as a sacred revelation. This understanding transforms science from a purely functional or utilitarian activity into a spiritually meaningful pursuit, elevating it to intellectual worship. In this view, the universe is not just something to be analyzed, but a living expression of divine wisdom meant to be engaged with reason (*'aql*) and heart (*qalb*).

Figure 2. *Ma'nā Harfī* Interpretation Process

¹⁸ Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, *The Words* (Nasr City: Sozler Publications, 1992).

By restoring *ma'nā ḥarfī* as the hermeneutic mode of engagement with creation, Nursi proposes an ontological basis for integrative education. The rational sciences (*ulūm al-ʿaqliyah*) are not discarded, but rather re-anchored in the metaphysical soil of *tawḥīd*. This approach enables the possibility of forming scientists who are also spiritual beings, individuals who not only understand physical laws but perceive within them the manifestations of the *asmā' al-ḥusnā* (Divine Names). Nursi's pedagogical method aims to spiritualize reason and rationalize faith, collapsing the modern binary between reason and revelation.¹⁹

In this context, the *Medresetü'z-Zebra* was more than a university; it was a project of civilizational epistemic renewal. Situated symbolically at the intersection of Kurdish, Arab, and Turkish regions, it signified ethno-cultural unity and the unity of knowledge, ethics, and being. Although the institution never materialized physically due to political opposition, its intellectual and theological legacy endures in the *Risale-i Nur* corpus and the Nurcu educational movement.

Nursi's response to the secular-religious educational bifurcation is neither nostalgia for premodern scholasticism nor wholesale adoption of Western scientism. Instead, it is a paradigmatic rearticulation of Islamic epistemology through the lens of *ma'nā ḥarfī* and *tawḥīd*, aimed at reconstructing a holistic model of knowledge that is at once rational, spiritual, and socially transformative. For both al-Attas and Nursi, the Islamization of science is not the rejection of empirical knowledge. Still, the reorientation of its purpose is to align the discovery of the natural world with spiritual insight and ethical development.

Structure, Aims, and Curriculum of Medresetü'z-Zebra

The *Medresetü'z-Zebra* was not merely a conventional educational institution, but also a comprehensive intellectual project and civilizational response to the fragmentation of knowledge, identity, and authority in the Muslim world. Emerging from the Ottoman decline and the aggressive secularization of the early Turkish Republic, Nursi's vision for *Medresetü'z-Zebra* embodied a radical epistemological critique of Western scientism and traditionalist scholasticism. It aimed to reconstitute a unified epistemic order that synthesized revelation (*wahy*), reason (*ʿaql*), morality and utility, theology and science.²⁰

The origins of this vision trace back to Nursi's formative exposure to both the classical *medrese* tradition and modern scientific discourses. He was deeply influenced by institutions like al-Azhar, which he praised as a beacon of Islamic scholarship. However, unlike al-Azhar's predominantly Arab-Islamic milieu, Nursi sought to position *Medresetü'z-Zebra* at the geopolitical nexus of the Turkish, Kurdish, and Arab worlds, specifically in the Van region, thus embedding it within

¹⁹ Ian S. Markham and Suendam Birinci Pirim, *An Introduction to Said Nursi: Life, Thought, and Writings* (Surrey: Ashgate, 1988).

²⁰ Hamidullah Marazi, "Empowering Education With Values And Integration Of Religion And Science: Madrasah Al-Zahra Model," in *International Conference on Empowering Islamic Civilization in the 21st Century*, 2015, 662–78.

the sociocultural plurality of the broader ummah.²¹ This strategic choice reflects Nursi's larger aspiration to reweave the torn fabric of Islamic civilizational unity (*ittihad-i Islam*), bridging sectarian and ethnic divides through a common educational and moral project.

Central to this project was a unique curricular structure that Nursi envisioned as both integrative and transformative. The curriculum combined three epistemological domains: *'ulūm al-diniyyah* (religious sciences), *'ulūm al-'aqliyyah* (rational and empirical sciences), and *'ulūm al-insāniyyah* (social and human sciences). This model was not a random combination of elements, but a purposeful integration grounded in synthesis based on the unity of truth (*wahdat al-haqiqah*), wherein different types of knowledge served different yet complementary functions: revelation purified the ethical compass, reason clarified understanding, and empirical inquiry enriched worldly competence.²² Such a synthesis exemplifies the core method of Islamization of Knowledge, as formulated by al-Attas, in which scientific and rational disciplines are purified of secular presuppositions and reintegrated into a metaphysical structure grounded in *tawḥīd*.²³

This integrative curriculum challenged the educational dualism that had plagued Islamic societies since the colonial era. Secular schools, often supported by colonial and missionary actors, emphasized utilitarian and material knowledge devoid of ethical anchoring. In contrast, traditional religious schools (*medrese*) focused narrowly on *fiqh* and theology, often neglecting scientific and societal developments.²⁴ Nursi's *Medresetü'z-Zehra* offered a corrective, advocating for a model where science is taught within a moral and spiritual framework, and religious knowledge is enriched by rational and empirical inquiry. As he argued in *Risale-i Nur*, "*the light of the conscience is religious sciences, the light of the intellect is modern science; the truth emerges from their confluence*".²⁵

As Aydin explains, this epistemic vision is operationalized through Nursi's concept of *mana-i harfî*, a semiotic-metaphysical approach in which every scientific phenomenon is read not as an independent substance (*mana-i ismî*), but as a sign pointing to divine attributes. This linguistic-epistemological reorientation transforms scientific inquiry into a process of discovering God's signs in the universe, thereby sacralizing the process of knowing.²⁶ Thus, *Medresetü'z-Zehra* was

²¹ Adil Söylemez, "İttihad-I İslâm," n.d., 113–19.

²² Himmawan Ayathurrahman and Sadam Fajar Shodiq, "Integrasi Ilmu Agama-Sains Badiuzzaman Said Nursi Dan Relevansinya Dengan Pendidikan Agama Islam Era Digital Di Indonesia."

²³ Al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam: A Framework for an Islamic Philosophy of Education*.

²⁴ N. F. Zamri et al., "Bediuzzaman Said Nursi and His Excellence in Modern Science in the Post-Caliphate Era," *Global Journal Al-Thaqafah* DECEMBER20, no. SPECIALISSUE (2024): 241–53, <https://doi.org/10.7187/GJATSI122024-16>.

²⁵ Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *Munazarat* (Istanbul: Sozler Nesriyat San, 2004).

²⁶ Aydin, *Said Nursi and Science in Islam: Character Building through Nursi's Mana-i Harfî*.

not merely an integrative institution in curricular terms, but a site for the reconfiguration of epistemology itself within a *tawḥīdī* worldview. For example, astronomy would not be limited to measuring stars and planets, but a theological reflection on Divine order (*niẓām ilāhī*). Logic and mathematics were not just tools for reasoning but disciplines that trained the intellect to perceive divine proportionality in the universe. This curriculum transformed the sciences into worship (*ibādah*), aligning reason with revelation.

The educational goal was not simply to transmit knowledge, but to cultivate *‘ālim-rabbānī*, scholars deeply rooted in divine consciousness (*taqwā*), intellectually agile, and ethically grounded. These individuals were envisioned as carriers of a prophetic intellectual legacy, capable of diagnosing civilizational maladies and offering integrative solutions. Thus, education for Nursi was inherently eschatological: it was not only preparation for this world but a moral formation aimed at salvation and spiritual flourishing. This ambition positioned *Medresetü’z-Zebra* as more than a university; it was a civilizational archetype for postcolonial Islamic renewal.²⁷

In line with this, Nursi resisted both the hegemonic imposition of secular-nationalist identity and the stagnation of Islamic thought into doctrinal rigidity. By fostering an educational environment that respected plurality, critical thinking, and faith-based reasoning, *Medresetü’z-Zebra* proposed a third way, beyond the binaries of modernity and tradition, East and West. He hoped such institutions would restore confidence among Muslims to engage the modern world not defensively, but from a position of ethical clarity and theological authenticity.²⁸

Though the project did not materialize physically due to political repression and resource limitations, Nursi asserted that his *Risale-i Nur* corpus functioned as its spiritual and intellectual realization. It provided the epistemic infrastructure for *Medresetü’z-Zebra* in textual form, accessible to students, scholars, and laypersons alike, thus transforming the idea into a living pedagogical legacy.²⁹

The vision of *Medresetü’z-Zebra* was a prophetic educational endeavor rooted in both classical Islamic tradition and modern pedagogical insight. It is a historical artefact today and as a living model for integrated, ethical, and spiritually nourishing education in the Muslim world and beyond.

Ethical Integration by Spiritualizing Scientific Education

Said Nursi’s educational philosophy embodies a comprehensive epistemological and moral critique of traditionalist stagnation and secular modernity. His vision, encapsulated in the conception of *Medresetü’z-Zebra*, was

²⁷ Rahimah Embong et al., “Integrated Education As a Solution for Educational Dualism From Said Nursi’S Perspective,” *PEOPLE: International Journal of Social Sciences* 3, no. 2 (2017): 914–28, <https://doi.org/10.20319/pijss.2017.32.914928>.

²⁸ Marazi, “Empowering Education With Values And Integration Of Religion And Science: Madrasah Al-Zahra Model.”

²⁹ Söylemez, “İttihad-I İslâm.”

not merely institutional but civilizational. At its core, this vision was grounded in a holistic integration of the spiritual, intellectual, and moral dimensions of human development, which he regarded as inseparable pillars for any authentic model of Islamic education.

In contrast to the positivist and utilitarian paradigm promoted by Western educational systems during and after the colonial encounter, Nursi developed a model restoring scientific inquiry's spiritual orientation. He regarded knowledge not as value-neutral data, but as an ethical pursuit oriented towards the recognition of *tanhīd*. This vision directly resonates with al-Attas's critique of modern secular education, which he argues promotes a conception of knowledge as value-neutral and divorced from metaphysical anchoring. For both Nursi and al-Attas, knowledge is not merely for technical mastery but for the cultivation of the *adib*, an integrated human being who recognizes the ontological centrality of *tanhīd* in all domains of life.³⁰ In his work *The Words*, Nursi observes, "Knowledge that does not lead to God is ignorance in disguise".³¹ This radical epistemological stance rejects the fragmentation of knowledge into isolated disciplines and insists instead on a unified metaphysical framework rooted in the Qur'an.

A key hermeneutical device in Nursi's philosophy is the distinction between *ma'nā ḥarfī* (indicative meaning) and *ma'nā ismī* (nominal meaning). Through *ma'nā ḥarfī*, all created phenomena are understood as signs (*āyāt*) that point beyond themselves to the attributes of God. From this perspective, scientific phenomena do not explain themselves but point to something beyond them; they signify the operation of Divine Names in the cosmos. This understanding transforms the study of the natural world into an act of *tafaqquh* (deep reflection) and spiritual devotion.³² Through this lens, science is viewed not as something secular but as a meaningful pursuit that encourages wonder, humility, and ethical responsibility.

The integration of knowledge is also evident in Nursi's famous maxim: "The light of the conscience is religious sciences. The light of the intellect is modern science. Reconciliation of both manifests the truth".³³

This aphorism underscores his argument that science and religion are complementary epistemic lights, each insufficient without the other. Religious sciences without rational inquiry risk falling into dogmatism and stagnation, while scientific learning devoid of spiritual grounding devolves into scepticism, relativism, or the mechanistic dehumanization of nature and self. His proposed educational model thus aimed not merely at transmitting data, but at forming ethical scholars who are spiritually awakened and socially responsible.

³⁰ Al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam: A Framework for an Islamic Philosophy of Education*.

³¹ Nursi, *The Words*.

³² Nursi.

³³ Nursi, *Munazarat*.

Such a paradigm directly responds to the epistemic and moral colonization faced by Muslim societies in the aftermath of Western imperialism. As Ihsan et al note, the Western-style secular curriculum, introduced aggressively in Atatürk's Turkey, created an artificial divide between *medrese*-educated scholars and secular school graduates, alienating them from traditional knowledge systems and moral and spiritual meaning.³⁴ Nursi's concept of *Medresetü'z-Zehra* was a direct response to this crisis: a university model that harmonized religious revelation, modern science, and moral education, inspired by institutions like al-Azhar but recalibrated for the challenges of the post-caliphate age.

Within this vision, education was not only an epistemic act but also an act of resistance. It was a strategy to liberate Muslims from the ethnocentric and secular assumptions of Western knowledge systems, which tend to marginalize metaphysical and moral concerns.³⁵ By reviving Islamic metaphysical anthropology and viewing the human being as a composite of spirit (*ruh*), intellect (*'aql*), and moral agency (*akhlāq*), Nursi reclaims the purpose of education as the holistic cultivation of the human person about God, society, and the cosmos.

This tripartite framework is evident in Nursi's distribution of the educational function across three institutional modes: the *medrese* for spiritual training, the *mekteb* for scientific instruction, and the *tekke* for moral and Sufi formation. Each represents a locus of formative knowledge, but only when united do they reflect the Qur'anic vision of integrated human development. Nursi's educational reform attempts to overcome the rigid dichotomies introduced by modern secular thought, between the sacred and profane, the rational and the revealed, the temporal and the eternal.³⁶

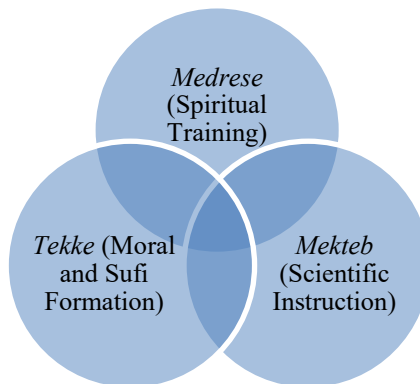


Figure 3. Tripartite Educational Framework in Nursi's Vision

³⁴ Ihsan, Purnamasari, and Purwaningtyas, "Said Nursi Education Concept: Integration of Spiritual, Intellectual, and Moral Dimensions."

³⁵ Nurulwahidah Fauzi, "Pemurnian Sistem Pendidikan Islam Berdasarkan Metode Risalah An-Nur: Analisis Kajian Di Negara Malaysia," *ESENSIA: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Ushuluddin* 15, no. 2 (2014): 261–70, <https://doi.org/10.14421/esensia.v15i2.777>.

³⁶ Ihsan, Purnamasari, and Purwaningtyas, "Said Nursi Education Concept: Integration of Spiritual, Intellectual, and Moral Dimensions."

Nursi's model also deeply engages with the formation of moral consciousness. Drawing on the Sufi ethic of *al-takhalluq bi-akhlāq Allāh* (assuming the morals of God), he proposes that ethics is not merely behavioral but ontological, arising from deep spiritual purification and gnosis (*ma'rifah*). In *The Words*, he writes, "*religious knowledge is the light of the heart, and modern sciences are the light of the intellect; the harmony between them gives rise to truth*".³⁷ This suggests that moral values cannot be taught in abstraction but must emerge from an integrated epistemic framework that fuses knowledge with inner transformation. In Nursi's system, moral education is not a supplement but a foundation.

Fauzi observes that the detachment of ethics from mainstream curricula has led to a cultural vacuum among youth, as evident in rising social dysfunctions.³⁸ Nursi's emphasis on *ma'rifatullah*, the experiential knowledge of God, as the telos of all educational endeavors offers a compelling alternative to this crisis, one that seeks to re-sacralize science, humanize technology, and spiritualize reason.

Said Nursi's vision of education through *Medresetü'z-Zebra* is not merely pedagogical but theological, ethical, and civilizational. It envisions a future where knowledge, virtue, intellect, and spirit are no longer estranged but reunited under Divine unity. This vision remains profoundly relevant today, particularly for educational reformers in Muslim societies seeking to navigate the challenges of secular modernity without abandoning their metaphysical and ethical moorings.

Discussion

Decolonial and Epistemological Critique

The findings of this study indicate that Said Nursi's conception of *Medresetü'z-Zebra* constitutes a substantive epistemological intervention that directly addresses the fragmentation of knowledge produced by secular modernity and the colonial restructuring of intellectual life in the late Ottoman and early Republican period. When analyzed using Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas's Islamization of Knowledge and Edward Said's critique of Western epistemic hegemony, the results reveal that Nursi's educational philosophy offers not merely curricular reform, but a deeper ontological reconfiguration of scientific inquiry within a unified metaphysical framework.

The results demonstrate a strong convergence between Nursi's *tawhīdic* epistemology and al-Attas's assertion that the root of the modern educational crisis lies in the loss of metaphysical orientation.³⁹ Al-Attas emphasizes that secular education produces confusion by divorcing knowledge from its spiritual and ethical telos, whereas Nursi operationalizes metaphysical orientation through

³⁷ Nursi, *The Words*.

³⁸ Fauzi, "Pemurnian Sistem Pendidikan Islam Berdasarkan Metode Risalah An-Nur: Analisis Kajian Di Negara Malaysia."

³⁹ Al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam: A Framework for an Islamic Philosophy of Education*.

the hermeneutical device of *ma' nā harfī*, which reinterprets natural phenomena as semiotic disclosures of the Divine.⁴⁰ This suggests that Nursi does not merely juxtapose religious and rational sciences; he redefines the purpose of scientific inquiry by casting the act of knowing as an encounter with divine meaning. In this respect, the findings indicate that Nursi anticipates contemporary efforts in the Islamization of Knowledge by providing a mechanism for re-sacralizing empirical disciplines within a Qur'anic ontology.

The historical analysis aligns with Edward Said's argument that colonial modernity functions through the imposition of epistemic hierarchies that delegitimize indigenous intellectual traditions.⁴¹ The forced secularization of education in early Republican Turkey reflects the internalization of the Orientalist dichotomy between rational modernity and religious backwardness.⁴² In this context, *Medresetü'z-Zebra* constitutes a decolonial epistemic resistance: it reclaims scientific inquiry from the ideological assumptions of Western secularism and repositions it within an indigenous metaphysical horizon. The results therefore extend Said's critique by illustrating how decolonial educational reconstruction must involve not only institutional autonomy but also conceptual and ontological rehabilitation.

The findings highlight that Nursi's model offers a structural and epistemic resolution to the entrenched dualism between the medrese system and Western-inspired secular schools. The results reveal that Nursi's proposal does not dissolve one system into the other but instead constructs a harmonized epistemic ecosystem wherein revelation, reason, and empirical investigation function as mutually reinforcing sources of meaning.⁴³ This synthesis echoes but also deepens approaches found in institutions such as al-Azhar, which historically integrated classical rational sciences yet did not fully reorient modern disciplines into a metaphysical *tawhīdīc* structure.⁴⁴ Viewed from this angle, the *Medresetü'z-Zebra* model embodies a third epistemic paradigm that transcends both traditional scholasticism and positivist secularism.

Comparative Analysis and Contemporary Relevance

Contemporary Islamic education finds itself at a pivotal crossroads. It must navigate epistemological fragmentation, an overreliance on secularized curricula, and the decline in spiritual vitality that renders many institutions unable to form holistic human beings. The educational dichotomy between religious and scientific knowledge, between ritual and reason, and between worldly success and divine purpose persists in many Muslim-majority contexts. This division results

⁴⁰ Aydin, *Said Nursi and Science in Islam: Character Building through Nursi's Mana-i Harfī*.

⁴¹ Said, *Orientalism*.

⁴² Azak, *Islam and Secularism in Turkey: Kemalism, Religion and the Nation State*.

⁴³ Nursi, *The Words*.

⁴⁴ Hasneli Hasneli, Meirison Meirison, and Qasem Muhammadi, "Educational Renewal During Muhammad Ali Period and Its Impact on The Al-Azhar Educational Institution," *Tafkir: Interdisciplinary Journal of Islamic Education* 5, no. 1 (2024): 27–40, <https://doi.org/10.31538/tijie.v5i1.687>.

not only in pedagogical inefficiency but also in a crisis of identity among Muslim learners who find it difficult to reconcile their faith with the demands of modernity.⁴⁵ While global education policies often emphasize technological and cognitive performance, they neglect the ethical, spiritual, and metaphysical dimensions of learning. Such a model remains inadequate for producing morally conscious leaders, especially in an era of cultural secularism, ideological confusion, and social polarization.⁴⁶

In this critical moment, Said Nursi's vision of *Medresetü'z-Zehra* offers a compelling response. His integrative education model was rooted in *tanhid*, not simply as a theological axiom but as an epistemological framework that affirms the unity of all branches of knowledge under divine wisdom. Drawing explicit inspiration from al-Azhar University in Cairo, which Nursi considered a successful exemplar of classical Islamic education, he envisioned *Medresetü'z-Zehra* as a regional center of learning that would serve the Turkish, Kurdish, and Arab peoples. Al-Azhar's emphasis on religious pluralism within Islamic traditions, its long-standing engagement with philosophy, and its relatively autonomous curriculum served as both a structural and philosophical inspiration for Nursi's vision.⁴⁷

However, Nursi did not advocate for a simple replication of al-Azhar. Instead, he sought to enhance its strengths while addressing its limitations. Where al-Azhar maintained a primarily religious curriculum, Nursi advocated for a more systemic integration of rational sciences and social sciences alongside the traditional religious sciences. He insisted that such integration was vital to safeguard religious scholars from dogmatism and secular scientists from ethical relativism.⁴⁸ In this sense, Nursi's model anticipated and sought to overcome the epistemic weaknesses that even venerable institutions like al-Azhar had begun to exhibit under colonial and modernist pressures.

The relevance of *Medresetü'z-Zehra* today is also manifest in its blueprint for curriculum and moral formation. Rather than offering education as a means to labor-market insertion alone, Nursi emphasized its function as a vehicle for moral agency, theological depth, and social transformation. The integration of disciplines aimed at forming students into *'ālim-rabbānī*, ethically upright, intellectually agile, and spiritually rooted scholars who can serve the ummah with sincerity and critical engagement. This resonates with efforts across the Islamic

⁴⁵ Agus Salim, Evita Yuliatul Wahidah, and Muhammadong, "Integrative Islamic Education: Critical Analysis Study in Islamic Education Institution," *Al-MISBAH (Jurnal Islamic Studies)* 9, no. 2 (2021): 152–62, <http://eprints.unm.ac.id/26470/>.

⁴⁶ Moh. Salis Fitrowan, "Integrasi Agama Dan Sains Dalam Pendidikan Keimanan: Perspektif Rasail Al-Nur Karya Said Nursi," *Tawazun: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 16, no. 2 (2023): 299–316, <https://doi.org/10.32832/tawazun.v16i2.15011>.

⁴⁷ Hasneli, Meirison, and Muhammadi, "Educational Renewal During Muhammad Ali Period and Its Impact on The Al-Azhar Educational Institution."

⁴⁸ Sutiono Sutiono and Iman Abdul Ridho, "Concept of Integrative Islamic Education," *Al-Risalah* 14, no. 1 (2023): 264–79, <https://doi.org/10.34005/alrisalah.v14i1.2666>.

world to move beyond ritual formalism and toward transformative education, as seen in institutions such as *Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor* in Indonesia, which similarly integrates Islamic sciences with humanities, modern languages, and civic responsibility.⁴⁹

From a comparative perspective, the integrative curriculum of *Medresetü'z-Zebra* shares similarities with, yet also diverges meaningfully from, models such as al-Azhar University in Cairo and *Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor* in Indonesia. Al-Azhar has long exemplified a classical model of Islamic education that incorporates reason (*'aql*) and traditional disciplines like logic, philosophy, and even astronomy within a religious framework, maintaining an epistemic pluralism that allows for internal theological diversity and limited dialogue with modern sciences.⁵⁰ However, al-Azhar's integration has mainly remained within the bounds of *taḥqīq* (scholarly verification), without fully reorienting modern sciences into a metaphysical structure grounded in *tanḥīd*. In contrast, *Medresetü'z-Zebra*, while inspired by al-Azhar, envisions a more systemic integration where empirical and rational sciences are not merely permitted but spiritually reframed through *ma'nā ḥarfī* and ontological unity, thus re-sacralizing scientific knowledge.⁵¹

Meanwhile, Gontor represents a modern Indonesian realization of integrative Islamic education, blending Islamic sciences, humanities, and modern languages within a disciplined and ethical environment. Gontor's curriculum encompasses natural and social sciences, as well as Qur'anic studies. It emphasizes leadership and moral training, which reflects a practical adaptation of integrative ideals, though it lacks the metaphysical and epistemological explicitness found in Nursi's vision.⁵² What distinguishes *Medresetü'z-Zebra*, therefore, is its theoretical ambition to reconstitute the very foundations of knowledge through a Qur'anic epistemology, positioning integrative education not only as curricular reform but as an ontological imperative and a civilizational response to colonial secular fragmentation. This ambition is further elaborated in Aydin's seven-dimensional knowledge model, which outlines how each layer, from empirical to metaphysical, must be aligned with the divine ontology for expertise to contribute to the holistic development of the self. Unlike Gontor's pragmatic moral education or al-Azhar's curriculum-based integration, Nursi's paradigm frames science as spiritually formative, aiming at intellectual literacy and character cultivation grounded in divine consciousness.⁵³

⁴⁹ Jusubaidi et al., "A Model of Transformative Religious Education: Teaching and Learning Islam in Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor, Indonesia," *Millah: Journal of Religious Studies* 23, no. 1 (2024): 171–212, <https://doi.org/10.20885/millah.vol23.iss1.art6>.

⁵⁰ Hasneli, Meirison, and Muhammadi, "Educational Renewal During Muhammad Ali Period and Its Impact on The Al-Azhar Educational Institution."

⁵¹ Nursi, *The Words*.

⁵² Jusubaidi et al., "A Model of Transformative Religious Education: Teaching and Learning Islam in Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor, Indonesia."

⁵³ Aydin, *Said Nursi and Science in Islam: Character Building through Nursi's Mana-i Harfi*.

Nursi's influence is also evident in the Turkish *dershane* system, which partly arose as a grassroots actualization of the *Medresetü'z-Zehra* spirit. These informal learning centers, centered around the *Risale-i Nur*, emphasized critical thinking, communal reading, and the fusion of reason and revelation. Though lacking the formal recognition of institutions like al-Azhar, they succeeded in cultivating resilient faith communities under secular repression. Furthermore, the integrative pedagogical philosophy underpinning *Medresetü'z-Zehra* has inspired Muslim education reformers to reevaluate their institutions' bifurcated structure.⁵⁴

In this regard, revisiting al-Azhar's historical role as a beacon of Islamic pluralism and Nursi's interpretive transformation of its spirit into a new civilizational ideal, *Medresetü'z-Zehra* emerges as both a continuation and a reformation of classical Islamic educational models. Its emphasis on integrative knowledge, ethical-spiritual development, and regional inclusivity remains urgently relevant as Islamic education seeks to meet the moral and intellectual challenges of the 21st century.

Conclusion

Medresetü'z-Zehra, as conceptualized by Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, is more than a historical proposal. It is an epistemological manifesto and a civilizational response to the crises of modernity, colonization, and internal disintegration in the Muslim world. Positioned at the nexus of multiple identities (Turkish, Kurdish, Arab) and multiple knowledge traditions (Islamic, rational, humanistic), Medresetü'z-Zehra sought to reunite what colonial modernity had forcibly separated: religion and reason, spirit and science, ethics and intellect. Through the lens of Al-Attas's Islamization of Knowledge, Nursi's educational model is best understood as a project to re-sacralize learning, to reintegrate disciplines under the spiritual and metaphysical guidance of *tawhīd*, and to cultivate the *adib*, the morally grounded and intellectually refined human being. At the same time, Edward Said's postcolonial critique illuminates how Nursi's project resists the epistemic violence of Orientalist narratives and asserts the dignity and legitimacy of indigenous Islamic knowledge systems.

The curriculum of Medresetü'z-Zehra, its structural pluralism, and its spiritual ethos inspire contemporary educational reformers, particularly in Muslim-majority societies struggling with inherited dichotomies and imported secular paradigms. Whether through the Nurcu *dershane* system in Turkey or integrated Islamic schools in Southeast Asia, the legacy of Medresetü'z-Zehra remains alive as a model of resistance, renewal, and ethical education. As global

⁵⁴ Fitrowan, "Integrasi Agama Dan Sains Dalam Pendidikan Keimanan: Perspektif Rasail Al-Nur Karya Said Nursi."

education faces moral crises and identity dislocations, Nursi's vision offers a coherent and timeless alternative that harmonizes the intellect with the soul, the temporal with the eternal, and the local with the universal. This article contributes to the emerging discourse on decolonial Islamic education by centering science as a field of Western dominance and a contested terrain that Nursi sought to reclaim through metaphysical integration. By situating the empirical sciences within the tawhīdī worldview, Nursi challenges the epistemic assumptions of modern secular education and proposes a prophetic model for reconceptualizing scientific inquiry as a spiritually nourishing and ethically grounded practice.

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