

# AYDINLANMA DÖNEMİ'NİN TOPLUMSAL YANSIMALARI IŞIĞINDA SAİD NURSİ'NİN AVRUPA MEDENİYETİ ELEŞTİRİSİ

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## Öz

Aydınlanma, Batı Avrupa'nın sosyal, siyasal ve kültürel yapılarında derin değişimlere ve dönüşümlere yol açmıştır. Rasyonalizm, bireycilik ve sekülerizm gibi ilkelere dayanan Aydınlanma felsefesi, yaşamın birçok alanında birey merkezli kaymalara zemin hazırlamış ve modern Batı medeniyetinin entelektüel temelini oluşturmuştur. Ancak bu süreçte din, kilise ve metafizik düşünce gibi kavramlar aynı anda marjinalleştirilmiş, manevi değerler büyük ölçüde göz ardı edilmiştir. Avrupa medeniyetini şekillendiren bu entelektüel paradigma, Said Nursî'nin ciddi eleştirileri de dâhil olmak üzere birçok açıdan sorgulamalara konu olmuştur. Nursî, *Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı*'nda maddi ilerleme ile manevi medeniyet arasında bir ayrım yapmış, Avrupa tarafından ortaya konulan ve küresel ölçekte yayılan medeniyet anlayışıyla eleştirel biçimde hesaplaşmıştır.

Bu çalışma, Aydınlanma ilkelerinin toplumsal sonuçlarını tarihsel ve sosyolojik bir bakış açısıyla incelemekte ve Said Nursî'nin eleştirilerini bu bağlamda ele almaktadır. Nitel bir metodoloji kullanılarak Nursî'nin *Lem'alar*, *Mektubat* ve *Hutbe-i Şamiye* gibi temel eserleri, ilgili akademik literatürle birlikte hermenötik ve içerik analizi yöntemleriyle analiz edilmektedir. Böylece çalışma, Aydınlanma temelli Avrupa medeniyeti ile maneviyat kavramı arasındaki gerilimi aydınlatmak üzere disiplinler arası bir perspektif sunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Said Nursî, Aydınlanma, Avrupa Medeniyeti, Ahlak, Sekülerizm

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# SAİD NURSÎ'S CRITIQUE OF EUROPEAN CIVILIZATION IN THE LIGHT OF THE SOCIAL REFLECTIONS OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT PERIOD

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## ABSTRACT

The Enlightenment caused profound changes and transformations in the social, political, and cultural structures of Western Europe. Rooted in principles such as rationalism, individualism, and secularism, Enlightenment philosophy fostered individual-centered shifts across many spheres of life and laid the intellectual foundation of modern Western civilization. However, it simultaneously marginalized concepts such as religion, the Church, and metaphysical thought, and significantly disregarded spiritual values. This intellectual paradigm, which came to shape European civilization, has been the subject of critical scrutiny on various fronts, including serious criticism by Said Nursî. In his *Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı* (Collection of the Epistles of Light), Nursî distinguished between material progress and spiritual civilization, critically engaging with the conception of civilization promoted by Europe and disseminated globally.

This study explores the social consequences of Enlightenment principles through a historical and sociological lens, and contextualizes Said Nursî's critiques. Employing a qualitative methodology, it analyzes key texts by Nursî including *Lem'alar* (Flashes), *Mektubat* (Letters), and *Hutbe-i Şamiye* (The Damascus Sermon), alongside relevant academic literature, using hermeneutic and content analysis methods. In doing so, the study offers an interdisciplinary perspective to illuminate the tension between Enlightenment-based European civilization and the concept of spirituality.

**Keywords:** Said Nursî, Enlightenment, European Civilization, Morality, Secularism

## Introduction

The Enlightenment, which profoundly influenced nearly all aspects of social life, has been defined in various ways (Outram, 2019, s.1). Although it emerged as a broad and somewhat ambiguous intellectual movement in the 18th century, its intellectual roots extend back to the 17th century. Initially associated with the scientific revolution, the Enlightenment sought to apply mathematical reasoning to the sciences and emphasized empirical observation over religious authority (Yayla, 2019, s.20-21). Alongside its scientific emphasis, rationalism constituted one of the core tenets of the period. During this time, reason began to challenge traditional beliefs concerning religion, politics, and knowledge (Heywood, 2015, s.123). Thus, the Enlightenment, which took shape in 17th and 18th-century Western Europe, restructured cultural and social life around the principles of rationalism, individualism, and secularism. The failure of the Christian belief system to provide satisfactory solutions to political, social, and economic problems led to increased scrutiny of religious authority, while the inability of the feudal system to address similar concerns opened up new debates around individual rights, liberty, and freedom.

This reimagined understanding of society and the individual introduced by Enlightenment thought also gave rise to new philosophical and existential questions. For the Enlightenment's epistemological and ontological claims came to be presented as the pinnacle of human intellectual development (Kalm, 2019, s.78). As a result, Western values, and those derived from them, were increasingly regarded as universally valid, contributing to a civilizational paradigm that dismissed the legitimacy of alternative worldviews. This notion of civilization, which came under critique in later centuries, served as the ideological foundation of European civilization and was subjected to serious criticism by Said Nursî, who proposed a belief- and humanity-centered social model as an alternative.

Said Nursî strongly opposed the materialist conception of civilization, which he regarded as fundamentally incompatible with Islam (Mardin, 2017, s.22). Instead of entirely rejecting European civilization, he acknowledged and appreciated its material and technical achievements. His primary criticism targeted what he termed the "Second Europe," a civilization devoid of spiritual and moral substance (Vahide, 2005, s.158). For Nursî, distancing from faith and belief in the afterlife results in a profound existential void, which in turn affects both personal and social well-being.

## Aim and Scope

This study seeks to analyze the social structures shaped by the Enlightenment and its ideological successor, European civilization, through a historical and sociological lens. It also aims to critically evaluate Nursî's responses to European civilization in light of the new principles introduced during the Enlightenment period.

Moreover, the study endeavors to contribute to ongoing academic debates concerning the social model articulated by Nursî, grounded in Islamic thought, and to assess its viability as an alternative to the civilizational paradigm established by modernization. In this regard, the research focuses on the impact of Enlightenment ideals on social and cultural structures, as well as on Bediüzzaman's critical reflections as articulated in his writings.

## Methods

This study employs a qualitative research design, utilizing both content analysis and hermeneutic interpretation as its primary analytical methods. The principal sources consist of Said Nursî's *Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı* (The Collection of the Epistles of Light), with particular attention to the texts *Lem'alar* (The Flashes), *Mektubat* (The Letters), *Hutbe-i Şamiye* (The Damascus Sermon), *Asa-yı Musa* (The Staff of Moses), and *Şualar* (The Rays). In addition to these primary texts, a range of secondary academic sources related to the Enlightenment period have been consulted to contextualize the discussion.

The research was conducted in three stages. First, the social implications of the Enlightenment were examined through its central conceptual principles. Second, Said Nursî's critique of European civilization and his proposed alternative solutions were analyzed. In the final stage, findings were synthesized, and suggestions for further research were provided.

## The Enlightenment Period and Social Structure

The Enlightenment, an intellectual and cultural movement spanning from the mid-17th to the early 19th century (Küçükalp and Cevizci, 2010, s.134), remains a subject of ongoing debate, with no single definition universally accepted (McClean, 2010, s.6). Its ambiguity stems from its broad association with scientific and cultural progress, as well as foundational concepts like reason and intellectual autonomy. This period fundamentally altered how society and the world were understood by elevating reason and critical thinking as the central attributes of the individual. It marked a deliberate break from

traditional social and epistemological frameworks, most notably through its challenge to the religious worldview, which constituted a fundamental pillar of its intellectual project (Çiğdem, 2008, s.21).

Perhaps the most significant innovation of the Enlightenment was the elevation of the individual as an autonomous subject. Immanuel Kant famously described this as humanity's emergence from a self-imposed immaturity, gaining the ability to reason independently. Through this, reason became a transformative force in both personal and public life (Porter, 1990, s.1), leading many to call this the "Age of Reason" (Mclean, 2010, s.3; Barnett, 2003, s.2). Rationality increasingly guided evaluation, decision-making, and social organization, often at the expense of metaphysical and religious frameworks, which were relegated to the periphery of intellectual discourse.

Importantly, the Enlightenment was not confined to abstract philosophical discourse permeated scientific, social, and cultural domains, promoting a worldview based on a radical break with the past and a rejection of metaphysical thought. Geographically centered in Europe, the Enlightenment's ideals became the bedrock of modern Western or European civilization, institutionalizing principles like freedom of thought, a belief in science, and individual autonomy. Thinkers of the Enlightenment actively contributed to these transformations through their writings and advocacy (Küçükalp and Cevizci, 2010, s.134-135).

The movement's core philosophy was built on rejecting the legacies of earlier eras, which were often portrayed as times "deprived of light" (Hof, 1995, s.15). This Enlightenment philosophy extended into virtually all aspects of both individual and collective life, fundamentally reshaping the sociocultural landscape. Accordingly, articulating the core principles of the Enlightenment is essential for understanding its broader social ramifications.

### ***The Conceptual Framework of the Enlightenment***

The Enlightenment was characterized by efforts to establish a new social order by fundamentally shifting the criteria for evaluating individuals and society. This new paradigm was grounded in absolute humanism and a rationalism that established human reason as the ultimate authority (Cevizci, 2017, s. 32). By positing reason as the sole guide for human conduct, it rejected any religious, traditional, or metaphysical explanations that could not be scientifically or rationally justified, leading to a more materialist interpretation of society.

### *Rationalism and Scientific Thought*

A defining feature of the Enlightenment was its unwavering commitment to reason and scientific thought, with reason becoming the focal point of all discourse. This rationalist framework saw rationality as the sole criterion for valid knowledge; any claim that fell outside the scope of reason was considered illegitimate. Consequently, for Enlightenment thinkers, reason constituted the only legitimate source of knowledge, while logical coherence served as the principal standard of truth (Duman, 2004, s.41).

The decline of the Church's influence and the perceived stagnation of Christian doctrine further propelled this rationalist orientation. As the Enlightenment progressed, reason and scientific inquiry increasingly displaced religious belief as the primary tools for organizing human life. Concepts like rationalism and secularism became foundational to modern Western thought (Kahn, 2019, s.31), signaling an erosion of ecclesiastical authority in favor of an order grounded in reason and empirical science (Tuğcu, 2003, s.548). As reason and scientific thought came to dominate the intellectual landscape, all claims to knowledge and value were increasingly subjected to the scrutiny of rational evaluation.

### *Individualism and Freedom*

Individualism and freedom are concepts as central to the Enlightenment as rationalism. Individualism presents the individual as a subject of inherent value, prioritizing the concrete person over abstract collectives and grounding its claims in liberty (Cevizci, 1999, s.150). Within this framework, an individual's rights and judgments are self-derived and not contingent on society.

The individual was thus positioned as the sovereign agent of their own life, subordinate only to their own reason (Can, 2020, s.187). In this regard, it may be argued that individualism, whose philosophical roots can be traced to Descartes, regarded as the founder of modern philosophy, and further reinforced by Locke's empiricism, is, alongside rationalism, a central pillar of Enlightenment thought (Cevizci, 2017, s.38).

The Enlightenment ideal construed the human being as a rational entity endowed with unique significance due to this capacity (Vural, 2002, s.128). Moreover, the concept of individualism is inextricably linked to the notion of freedom. The individual is deemed free to determine the trajectory of his life, provided that such freedom does not infringe upon the rights of **others**. This

liberty is a circumscribed freedom that requires the individual to refrain from violating the life, physical integrity, or property of others. In this context, it is regarded as the fundamental expression of human freedom (Locke, 2004).

### *Secularization and Laicism*

It is inconceivable that the Enlightenment would pursue a reform agenda entirely divorced from religion. Christianity and the institutional authority of the Church were among the most significant elements shaping the intellectual contours of the Enlightenment. In this regard, Enlightenment thought sought to construct a philosophy of life independent of religious foundations within the intellectual milieu of seventeenth-century Europe. The human effort to comprehend life through autonomous reason, distanced from the frameworks of religion and tradition, represented one of the era's most defining manifestations (Gümüslü, 2008, s.124). Within this framework, the hallmark features of Enlightenment thought, such as rationalism, critical inquiry, and opposition to religion and ecclesiastical authority, became central to its philosophical orientation (Vural, 2002, s.131).

Enlightenment thinkers, who regarded critical reasoning as their principal instrument, consistently positioned themselves in opposition to what they perceived as irrational belief systems. To them, traditional institutions and the normative values they sustained functioned as impediments to the full realization of human potential. Practices deemed superstitious, and attitudes associated with dogmatism and intolerance, were targeted by Enlightenment philosophers in their broader project of intellectual and social reform. In a similar vein, thinkers of the period endeavored to secularize moral discourse by opposing practices that reinforced privilege or curtailed individual liberty (Zeitlin, 1968, s.4).

The defining ambition of the Enlightenment was to institutionalize a secular worldview across all domains of life (Gökberk, 2010, s.291). As a consequence of the secularization impulse, both Enlightenment thought and the modern intellectual paradigms that evolved from it assumed an increasingly materialist character. As Adorno and Horkheimer poignantly observe, the Enlightenment's orientation toward objects eventually mirrored the relationship between a dictator and his people (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2014, s.26).

### *Equality and Social Justice*

A fundamental premise of Enlightenment thought was removing barriers to human reason, which fostered individualism (İşçi, 2016, s.273). Individualism required personal liberty and, by extension, equality under the rule of

law. Enlightenment philosophers prioritized the individual's freedom within society. This freedom, framed by social contract theory and grounded in natural rights, was considered indispensable to human rights (Ağaoğulları, 2019, s.525). Key principles such as liberty, equality, fraternity, the rule of law, and the equal value of all human beings formed the philosophical basis for social order and justice (Taplamacıoğlu, 1963, s.26; Uslu, 2021, s.15).

Modern thought, carrying forward Enlightenment ideals, was anthropocentric and individual-oriented. With transcendent values and religious references largely excluded from social organization, state and society were restructured around the centrality of the individual. While pre-Enlightenment perspectives often justified natural hierarchies and inequality through claims of innate superiority, Enlightenment and modern political thought rejected these, advocating a vision of justice grounded in the inherent equality of all humans. Consistent with natural law theory, modern legal philosophy affirmed that every individual possesses equal rights simply by being human, a principle embedded in the modern concept of the rule of law (Küçükalp & Cevizci, 2010, s.158).

The Enlightenment's defining features are often summarized through concepts such as reason, science, liberty, secularization, individualism, social justice, and the limited state. Yet, these ideals were not interpreted or accepted uniformly. Many thinkers embraced their transformative potential, while others cautioned against their potential social and ethical consequences.

### ***Social Reflections of the Enlightenment Period***

While explaining the general contours of the Enlightenment period, the primary focus lies not on accepting or rejecting its core concepts, but on highlighting its transformative spirit. While scholars emphasize different principles depending on their framework, the defining characteristics generally include rationalism, secularism, individualism, freedom, equality, scientific thought, and social justice. These ideas, whether autonomous or subsidiary to broader doctrines, underpinned the Enlightenment's project of modernization and societal transformation.

The Enlightenment reinterpreted individual and collective life, particularly in Europe (Çüçen, 2005, s.25), shaping European and broader Western civilization, which has drawn from diverse cultural sources. Kalın (2024, s.28) describes its evolution as a pendulum between Athens, symbolizing pagan Greek rationalism, and Jerusalem, representing Christian theological heritage.

Antiquity favored Athens; the Middle Ages elevated Rome and Christianity; modernity restored Athenian reason. Attempts to unite reason and revelation, or science and religion were hindered by Christianity's institutional entanglement with political and economic power, distancing it from spiritual authenticity. The Reformation, Renaissance, and Enlightenment marked historical reckonings, enabling Europe to transcend traditional limits and open new intellectual horizons (Kalin, 2024, s.94).

The Enlightenment marked a civilizational rupture and renewal, advancing liberty, rational inquiry, and scientific progress (Beyazit, 2023, s.7). Yet prioritizing reason in addressing social and political problems had both constructive and destructive consequences (Cevzici, 2017, s.15). One major limitation was neglecting the spiritual dimension of life. Said Nursî argued that a civilization shaped solely by technical progress and rationalism could not address moral concerns (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2014).

The efforts of Enlightenment thinkers to construct a civilization centered on reason, independent of moral foundations, have led to significant ruptures within philosophical and societal structures. The elevation of reason above all else relegates morality and moral values to a secondary position. Yet, it is not reason but morality that fundamentally defines human nature. Thus, moral values precede other values in determining the order and harmony of individual life. As Abdurrahman (2024, s.15) argues, the absence of morality, which constitutes one of the indispensable qualities of human existence, inevitably disrupts the social and personal order. When morality is subordinated to reason, essential human values are disregarded, and, in extreme cases, moral considerations are entirely excluded in favor of a purely rational framework, one that proves inadequate in addressing the deeper questions of human existence and social harmony.

A central theme advanced by Enlightenment thinkers in their vision of society was the deliberate separation of morality from religion on the basis of rationality. As Abdurrahman (2014, s.124–125) notes, this attempt to secularize morality led to a number of philosophical and existential ruptures, articulated in three main principles:

1. **Human-Centeredness:** This principle rejects God's centrality, asserting the sufficiency of human reason. Enlightenment thinkers grounded their theories in the belief that human beings are autonomous and self-sufficient, thereby excluding God from all aspects of life and placing reason and the individual at the center of societal organization.

2. **Instrumental Reason:** Reason is posited as the sole authority in human affairs, rendering divine revelation obsolete. This principle requires the severance of any connection to revealed knowledge, advocating for a system in which human reason functions as the internal regulator of thought and behavior, independent of external religious authority.
3. **Worldly Attachment:** This principle denies any connection to the afterlife, promoting a worldview in which existence is confined to the material world. Enlightenment thinkers regarded eschatological promises and salvific doctrines as deceptive, and thus dismissed them entirely. Accordingly, this approach severs the existential bond between human beings and metaphysical or transcendental realities.

The paradox of privileging reason while neglecting moral values is evident in Enlightenment freedom. Modern freedom, shaped by rationalism, focuses on procedural autonomy without moral guidance, leaving value judgments entirely to the individual. This allows for any lifestyle, hedonistic, religious, or self-serving, without normative evaluation. Traditional frameworks, in contrast, prioritize a meaningful life over mere autonomy. Kalın (2023, s.314) urges individuals to seek existential significance prior to asserting independence, warning that content-free freedom fosters moral and social crises (Kalın, 2023, s.94).

The Enlightenment's philosophical system, in its approach to the individual, society, religion, and morality, emphasized technical rationality over existential meaning. Function displaced meaning, producing impasses because individuals and societies cannot be fully understood apart from their moral and spiritual dimensions. Evaluating values independently of religion and morality (Şeriati, 1980, s.34) conflicts with human nature. Historically, religion and morality have been integral to social, economic, and political life, for better or worse. The Enlightenment's rejection of this legacy, without offering viable replacements, deepened a crisis of meaning. Among its sharpest critics, Nursî underscored the failure of Enlightenment civilization to address the spiritual and moral aspects of human existence.

### **Said Nursî's Criticisms of European Civilization**

Said Nursî, an influential Islamic thinker of the modern period, articulated his views on religion, belief, civilization, social order, the individual, and freedom through a coherent framework grounded in rational argumentation and persuasion. These ideas are extensively developed in his monumental *Risale-i*

*Nur*, comprising 130 sections (Edip, 2011, s.105). His thought synthesizes religious sciences, rooted in Islamic principles, with contemporary scientific knowledge, which formed the foundation of his worldview (Kara, 2014, s.979).

Nursî's engagement with Western civilization, particularly its European expression, is situated within this dual framework. While he saw Western and European civilizations as facets of one entity, his critique extended beyond politics or culture to moral, ontological, and epistemological issues. The reason Nursî's criticism is commonly evaluated in relation to Enlightenment philosophy is due to his recognition that Western civilization was inseparable from Enlightenment thought. Because Western civilization was inseparable from Enlightenment thought, he regarded it as the embodiment of modernity (Kalm, 2019, s.44). European civilization, as a product and extension of Enlightenment rationalism, thus came to be viewed as the embodiment of modernity. For this reason, Nursî's critique is best understood as a critical response to the heritage of Enlightenment thinking.

At the core of Nursî's critique lies his concern for the human condition and societal order. Western philosophy, he argued, focused narrowly on intellect, neglecting the integrated nature of human existence and denying what could not be reduced conceptually (Garaudy, 2024, s.63). For Nursî, Western values had lost legitimacy; despite seeking worldly success through "religious bribes," European civilization failed, leading to two world wars and widespread suffering (Nursî, 2013, s.447).

Nonetheless, Nursî did not reject European civilization entirely. He distinguished between "two Europes":

"Europe is twofold. One follows the sciences, which serve justice and right and the industries beneficial for the life of society through the inspiration from true Christianity; ... the second corrupt Europe, through the darkness of the philosophy of Naturalism, supposing the evils of civilization to be its virtues, has driven mankind to vice and misguidance." (Nursî, 2009, s.160).

In Said Nursî's thought, the values promoted by Western philosophy have lost their legitimacy and moral force. According to Nursî, although European civilization sought to dominate the world through what he terms "religious bribes," it ultimately failed in this endeavor. As the sins and moral shortcomings of European civilization came to outweigh its virtues, and its vices were elevated above its aesthetic and ethical contributions, humanity was struck by the catastrophic consequences of two world wars. In this regard,

Nursî attributes the bloodshed of the modern era to the fruits of European civilization, which he sees as a direct product of Enlightenment rationalism (Nursî, 2013, s.447). Consequently, he argues that this civilization has failed to bring peace to humanity, on individual, social, and cultural levels, and has instead inflicted profound harm.

However, before engaging in a detailed conceptual critique of European civilization, Nursî is careful to emphasize that his critique is not a wholesale rejection. In his own words:

“It should not be misunderstood; Europe is twofold. One follows the sciences which serve justice and right and the industries beneficial for the life of society through the inspiration it has received from true Christianity; this first Europe I am not addressing. I am addressing the second corrupt Europe which, through the darkness of the philosophy of Naturalism, supposing the evils of civilization to be its virtues, has driven mankind to vice and misguidance.” (Nursî, 2009, s.160).

Here, Nursî distinguishes between two strands of European civilization. The first Europe, which draws upon Christian ethical teachings, is seen as a contributor to social welfare, scientific progress, and justice. In contrast, the second Europe, dominated by materialistic and positivist ideologies, is responsible for spiritual decay, social exploitation, and cultural disintegration. It is this latter form of civilization that Nursî critiques, viewing it through the lens of Islamic civilizational principles (Hamid, 2014, s.6). This second Europe, he argues, anesthetizes humanity by removing the concept of the afterlife, something which, in his view, the entirety of creation testifies to, from public consciousness and moral consideration.

Nevertheless, Nursî’s critique is selective rather than absolute. He acknowledges that aspects of European civilization, particularly in science, technology, and human rights, have yielded positive developments, and these are not included within the scope of his criticism. Instead, his objections are articulated within a broader framework of religion, revelation, reason, the individual, and society.

At the heart of Nursî’s critique lies the theological assertion that human beings do not and cannot possess autonomous ownership of themselves. This assertion implies a fundamental and inseparable link between the human individual and the Creator. Western thought, according to Nursî, has endeavored to sever this connection by constructing a notion of the individual that is self-sufficient and detached from divine accountability. As a result, the indi-

vidual, disconnected from their metaphysical grounding, falls into a state of existential emptiness. This spiritual and ontological rupture has given rise not only to crises of meaning at the individual, cultural, and social levels but also to a neglect or distortion of the afterlife, which is either denied or redefined in ways incompatible with Islamic theology. Thus, a closer analysis of Nursî's multifaceted criticisms reveals that his opposition to European civilization is not a rejection of modernity per se, but a call to reevaluate the moral, spiritual, and metaphysical foundations upon which a civilization is built.

### ***Criticism of Creating a Society Independent of Religion***

Said Nursî strongly opposed the foundational aspiration of European civilization to establish a society divorced from religion. In his view, revealed religion, specifically what he calls "the religion of truth", is essential and indispensable for both individual and collective life (Sönmez, 2017, s.132). This conviction is not only central to his philosophical worldview but also underpins his proposed educational model. In his *Medresetü'z-Zehra* project, an educational program intended to reflect an ideal model of civilizational formation, Nursî proposed the integration of religious sciences and the positive (modern) sciences (Hayrat Foundation Scientific Research Committee, 2014, s.142). This synthesis is rooted in his vision of a morally and intellectually balanced social order. As he famously stated:

"The light of conscience is religious sciences. The light of reason is civil sciences. The truth becomes manifest through the combination of the two. When separated, the first gives rise to fanaticism, and the second to deceit and skepticism." (Nursî, 2013, s.424).

In this framework, just as reason is indispensable for the development of the intellect, conscience, nourished by religion, is necessary for the cultivation of the moral sphere. According to Nursî, genuine social harmony can only emerge through the harmonious coexistence of religion and science. He critiques the modern scientific paradigm for having established itself on the foundations of secularism, arguing that progress and development have been mistakenly equated with the abandonment of religion (Tarhan, 2012, s.147).

While this secular impulse may be somewhat understandable in the context of Christian Europe, given that Christianity had historically suppressed rational inquiry, leading to its eventual reformation, Nursî emphasizes that Islam does not share the same epistemological or theological constraints. During the medieval period, while the Christian tradition rejected reason, empirical science, and disciplines such as physics and chemistry, Nursî never

dismissed these fields. On the contrary, he sought to integrate them with religious sciences as part of a comprehensive educational vision, affirming that societal peace must also be founded upon this synthesis (Tarhan, 2012, s.58).

According to Nursî, one of the gravest harms European civilization inflicted upon its own populations, and humanity at large, was the alienation of individuals from true Christianity and the pursuit of solutions grounded in irreligiosity. He believed that attempts to resolve existential questions through reason alone were ultimately futile. A person estranged from religion through rationalism alone, he argued, could neither attain inner peace nor preserve their essential human nature. Instead, such a person would live a form of spiritual torment even in the material world.

For Nursî, the roots of this existential crisis lie in two interrelated phenomena: first, the secular philosophy that emerged when European civilization severed itself from genuine Christian spirituality; second, the misguided civilizational paradigm that accompanied this philosophical shift. Far from delivering social peace, this trajectory, according to Nursî, leads only to collective spiritual collapse (Nursî, 2013, s.119–120). To illustrate the depth of this crisis, Nursî poses a rhetorical question:

“O miserable soul that spreads disbelief and infidelity! Is it possible for someone tormented in soul, conscience, intellect, and heart to be happy just because his body is adorned with superficial luxury and wealth? Can such a person truly be called happy?” (Nursî, 2013, s.119).

In this light, the various secular ideologies and philosophical movements that sought to replace religion have not only failed to bring peace but have deepened the crisis of meaning in modern society. These ideologies, unable to address humanity’s metaphysical and existential questions, have proven inadequate in satisfying the ontological needs of both the individual and the collective. The result is a society severed from meaning and spiritual depth.

Nursî argues that the absence of compelling answers regarding the purpose of human existence has inevitably led European civilization into a spiritual void. This “second Europe” is the domain of materialism, skepticism, and the denial of the afterlife. It is precisely this domain that Nursî subjects to rigorous critique.

For Nursî, the removal of religion, an institution that explains the meaning and purpose of life, from the center of human life not only leads to individual disorientation but also creates a broader existential vacuum. Since human

beings are existentially and morally connected to the entire universe (Nursî, 2013, s.201), the loss of religion not only alienates them from that cosmic network of meaning but condemns them to a life devoid of purpose, a “hellish” existence in this world itself.

### ***Criticism of Rationalism as the Sole Criterion***

Rationalism stands as one of the most influential intellectual developments to emerge from the Enlightenment, playing a formative role in the construction of modern European civilization. In this context, rationalism is generally understood as the internal authority by which human beings formulate intellectual and practical judgments, independent of any external validation. This epistemological stance, which rejects metaphysical or divine referents as sources of truth, has been the subject of significant critique within Nursî's thought (Abdurrahman, 2024, s.125). While Said Nursî recognizes reason as a vital and distinguishing attribute bestowed upon humanity, he argues that attributing to reason an autonomous and absolute authority beyond its natural limits ultimately leads to the moral and existential decline of both the individual and society.

Said Nursî identifies as a foundational flaw of modern European civilization the notion that every being, from the greatest angel to the smallest creature, is the sovereign of its own existence. He considers this individualistic axiom - elevating self-ownership and autonomy to a universal principle - to be among the most corrupt and unfounded doctrines of Enlightenment-influenced thought. Bediüzzaman considers the belief “everything is its own” as inherently flawed. He writes:

“Among causes the most noble and with regard to choice the one with the most extensive will is man. But out of the most obvious acts connected to man's will like thinking, speaking, and eating, only a hundredth single, doubtful part is subject to his will and is within his power. So how can it be said that he owns himself?” (Nursî, 2009, s.163).

This critique illustrates Nursî's rejection of human autonomy as posited by Enlightenment rationalism. He attributes such misjudgments to what he calls a form of distorted intellect, described as “one-eyed genius” and “cursed intelligence”, which, by severing the connection with the Creator, leads to the alienation of human beings from their ontological grounding.

Despite his critique, Nursî does not discount the importance of reason. On the contrary, he holds both reason and the human being in high esteem,

provided they remain anchored in their connection to the Creator. He argues that once this connection is severed, reason ceases to serve its intended purpose and becomes a source of confusion and existential disorientation. Through what he refers to as the *sirr-ı vahdet* (the “secret of unity”), humanity attains its highest ontological and spiritual potential - becoming the most perfected of all beings, the finest fruit of the universe, the addressee and companion of the Creator. In Said Nursî’s metaphysical framework, human beings possess aims, desires, and faculties so expansive that only a divine authority whose will encompasses the entirety of existence can fulfill them. Thus, reason - when functioning within the framework of divine unity - becomes a key to both sacred knowledge and the countless mysteries of the universe (Nursî, 2008, s.12).

In this light, Bediüzzaman critiques the rationalist paradigm of modern European civilization for divorcing reason from its divine referent. He contends that this disconnection renders rationalism incapable of offering lasting or meaningful solutions to the human condition. Instead, it results in transient and illusory remedies that ultimately give rise to new crises. The absence of metaphysical grounding leads to a repetitive cycle of existential dilemmas and meaninglessness, wherein each solution compounds the very problem it aims to resolve.

### ***Criticism of Secularization***

The secularist philosophy, articulated by Enlightenment thinkers and embraced by European civilization, has rendered a world-centered or secular outlook inevitable. Rooted in the notion of prioritizing the temporal over the eternal, this worldview fosters an attachment to worldly life by discouraging a focus on the hereafter. Within this framework, worldly existence is regarded as the definitive and ultimate sphere of human life (Abdurrahman, 2024, s.125). Such an understanding stands in stark contrast to the theological and existential vision of Nursî, for whom a life divorced from faith and belief in the hereafter is not only devoid of meaning but may also become a source of profound suffering and despair.

Said Nursî emphasizes that when one adopts a materialist philosophy divorced from faith, what he terms a “fanciful journey” through the universe, no being can be understood or accepted independently of the Creator. For him, the cosmos itself resists interpretations that exclude divine presence and purpose (Nursî, 1990, s.11). Once the metaphysical bond between humanity and the Creator is severed, as it is under materialist paradigms, individuals

encounter a host of existential dilemmas and unanswered questions that defy resolution within a purely immanent framework.

In a powerful allegorical passage, Nursî vividly describes the human condition under the shadow of secular materialism:

“The world of humanity appeared to me as though on a cinema screen. I looked through the telescope of the people of misguidance and saw that world to be so dark and terrifying that I cried out from the depths of my heart. “Alas!” I cried. For they had desires and hopes that stretched to eternity, thoughts and imaginings that embraced the universe, the earnest desire for everlasting happiness and Paradise, an innate capacity and powers on which no limit had been placed and which were free, yet despite their innumerable needs and their weakness and impotence they were exposed to the attacks of innumerable enemies and the blows of innumerable calamities. Under the perpetual threat of death, they lived out their brief and tumultuous lives in wretched circumstances. Ever looking to the grave, which for the misguided is the door to everlasting darkness, they suffered the continuous blows of death and separation, the most painful state for the heart and conscience. I saw that singly and in groups they were being thrown into that black well.” (Nursî, 1996, s.7-8)

This passage encapsulates Nursî's core critique of secularism: in stripping human life of its transcendental referents, secular philosophies leave individuals vulnerable to existential despair. Without belief in the hereafter, human desires, by nature expansive and oriented toward eternity, cannot be adequately fulfilled. Thus, when confined to a purely worldly existence, the human soul is left in a state of perpetual dissatisfaction and psychological unrest.

According to Said Nursî, true peace, both individual and social, is unattainable when the spiritual dimension of life is ignored or denied. Human beings are endowed with capacities, such as reason and emotion, that reach far beyond the limits of worldly life. When these faculties are left unfulfilled by metaphysical and eschatological belief, a profound void emerges. In contrast, European civilization, following the Enlightenment, sought to unify society around secular ideals, systematically detaching individuals from religion, the hereafter, and belief in life after death. While this secular unity may have yielded technical and administrative advances, it has failed to respond to the deeper, spiritual needs of humanity.

The philosophical discourses that replaced religion with human-centered rationalism have proven insufficient in addressing the human longing for per-

manence, meaning, and salvation. Bediüzzaman posits that this failure has resulted in a pervasive crisis of meaning. The solution, he argues, lies in the restoration of the human connection to the Creator, to belief in the afterlife, and to a worldview that transcends the temporal. Only through such a metaphysical reorientation can humanity regain existential stability and true contentment.

### ***Criticism of Individualism and Freedom***

Individualism and the modern conception of freedom are often regarded as among the most significant intellectual legacies of the Enlightenment. While these developments have contributed to shaping contemporary Western civilization, their long-term effects remain the subject of considerable critique. As Garaudy (2022, s.77-78) argues, since the Renaissance, individuals in Western societies have increasingly found themselves condemned to solitude and alienation. This condition, he suggests, is a direct consequence of rampant individualism—a cultural paradigm that prioritizes the self over community, thereby engendering the fragmentation of both the individual and society.

From the perspective of Nursî, individualism as cultivated in Western civilization is problematic on multiple levels. In his comparative analysis of the “civilization of the present”, a term he uses to describe modern Western society, and the “civilization of the Qur’an,” Bediüzzaman identifies five foundational principles underpinning the former. Among these, he draws particular attention to the principle of “the alluring service, the encouragement of desires and whims, and the satisfaction of desires”, which he describes as a key contributor to the moral and spiritual degradation of humanity (Nursî, 2013, s.501). In his view, the unchecked pursuit of individual desire nurtured by secular individualism leads not to liberation, but to spiritual decline.

In contrast, Nursî’s Qur’anic vision advocates for a conception of the individual who, rather than yielding to personal whims, chooses the righteous path. True development and spiritual perfection, he asserts, depend on self-discipline and responsibility, not self-indulgence. This perspective seeks to establish a balance between the rights of the individual and the well-being of the collective. In this context, Said Nursî’s conception of freedom is not an endorsement of absolute autonomy but a model that harmonizes individual agency with moral accountability and social responsibility (Tarhan, 2012, s.56-57).

Said Nursî also differentiates between two types of individualism: one that is rooted in egoism and detachment, as seen in Western philosophical traditions, and another that is grounded in faith and solidarity. He contrasts

the student nurtured by Western philosophy with the student shaped by Qur'anic principles, characterizing the latter as follows:

“Whereas, looking on all the righteous worshippers in the heavens and on the earth as brothers, the Qur'an's student makes supplication for them in sincere fashion. He is happy at their happiness and he feels a powerful connection with them in his spirit, so that praying he says: “Oh God, grant forgiveness to all believing men and women!” (Nursî, 2009, s.164).

This description reflects a vision of individuality that is altruistic, spiritually connected, and communally embedded. Unlike the self-centered individual promoted by modern secular paradigms, the Qur'anic individual, in Nursî's thought, finds joy in the well-being of others and sorrow in their suffering. Such a disposition acts as a moral restraint on the individual, preventing the descent into narcissism and hedonism that can arise from an unchecked notion of personal freedom.

Ultimately, Said Nursî criticizes the Enlightenment-born individualistic worldview for its tendency to sever the ties between individuals and their moral, spiritual, and communal responsibilities. Freedom, when conceived without limits or ethical foundations, ceases to be a virtue and becomes a source of harm. Thus, he calls for a redefinition of both individualism and freedom within the framework of faith, emphasizing that true liberation lies in conscious servanthood, mutual compassion, and moral discipline.

## Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the Enlightenment principles of scientific rationality, secularism, individualism, and freedom profoundly reshaped European civilization by rejecting religion and tradition. Intellectual paradigms that included metaphysical or spiritual dimensions were abandoned for a rationalist, humanist worldview rooted in empirical science. This materialist orientation extended to the moral and spiritual realms, severing the individual's connection with God and religious values.

The marginalization of divine references weakened social cohesion as secularism overshadowed spirituality, leading to the questioning of Western civilization's moral foundations, both in Europe and beyond. In this context, the Islamic world began to reassess modernity's claims, with Nursî's writings offering a significant critique of the Enlightenment-based foundations of European civilization.

In his *Risale-i Nur Külliyatı*, Said Nursî critiques the Enlightenment-influenced model of European civilization, particularly its implications for faith, society, culture, and politics. His criticism is not a wholesale rejection; he appreciates Europe's scientific and technical advancements. Instead, his critique targets the "Second Europe," a conception of civilization he views as harmful for its neglect of spiritual and metaphysical realities.

Said Nursî argues that a meaningful life is unattainable for individuals who sever their connection with God. He posits that such individuals not only suffer personally but also threaten social harmony. The moral and existential crises of modern individuals, he claims, stem from a civilization that disregards ultimate realities like God, the afterlife, and death. Since humans possess intellectual, emotional, and spiritual faculties connecting them to the universe, any philosophy ignoring these dimensions is insufficient. A materialist philosophy that neglects these inherent human needs for meaning, imagination, and cognition fails to bring happiness and undermines society's moral fabric.

In this regard, Nursî's intellectual framework, rooted in Islamic civilization and faith, offers a counter-narrative to Enlightenment secularism. His vision calls for restoring the individual's spiritual connection with God, which he sees as the cornerstone of personal and social well-being. His critique is not merely oppositional but a constructive appeal to return to the essential values of Islamic civilization.

The findings suggest that Nursî's thought provides an interdisciplinary framework for understanding the tension between spirituality and modern civilization. His perspective offers critical insights into the moral dilemmas created by the Enlightenment and proposes a spiritually grounded alternative from the Islamic intellectual tradition. This study thus underscores the importance of reevaluating civilization through diverse cultural and religious traditions to foster a meaningful dialogue between Islamic thought and the modern secular world.

Based on these conclusions, the following recommendations are proposed for future research:

- The impact of Enlightenment transformations on non-European societies could be analyzed through Bediüzzaman's critical framework.
- The relationship between Nursî's spirituality-centered critiques and contemporary social structures warrants deeper investigation.

- A comparative analysis of Enlightenment ideals and Nursî's alternative conception of civilization could shed light on their respective implications for modern society.

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