

The Epistemology of Tawhīd in Said Nursi's Perspective as a Response to the Secularization of Modern Knowledge

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Abstract:

The secularization of modern knowledge has produced a dichotomy between religious and worldly sciences, resulting in the disconnection between science, values, and divinity in the human understanding of reality. This condition has prompted various responses from Muslim thinkers, one of whom is Said Nursi through his concept of the epistemology of tawhīd as articulated in the *Risale-i Nur*. This study aims to analyze how the epistemology of tawhīd in Said Nursi's perspective serves as a critical response to the secularization of modern knowledge and offers an integration of revelation, reason, and nature as a unified source of knowledge. This research is a qualitative library-based study employing a philosophical-analytical approach. Primary data are derived from Said Nursi's works, particularly the *Risale-i Nur*, while secondary data are obtained from relevant books, journals, and scholarly literature. The data are analyzed using content analysis to examine the epistemological concepts developed by Nursi. The findings reveal that Said Nursi's epistemology of tawhīd rejects the separation between religious knowledge and rational sciences. For Nursi, the universe is a *cosmic book* (*kitāb kawuniyyah*) that guides humans toward the recognition of God, while revelation serves as the principal guide in understanding the meaning behind natural phenomena. This integration forms a holistic, theocentric, and meaningful paradigm of knowledge. Thus, Nursi's epistemology of tawhīd not only critiques the secularization of modern knowledge but also proposes a model for the reconstruction of Islamic epistemology relevant to the contemporary context.

Keywords: Epistemology of Tawhīd, Said Nursi, Secularization of Knowledge, *Risale-i Nur*.

Abstrak:

Sekularisasi pengetahuan modern telah melahirkan dikotomi antara ilmu agama dan ilmu dunia, yang berdampak pada terputusnya relasi antara sains, nilai, dan ketuhanan dalam cara pandang manusia terhadap realitas. Kondisi ini mendorong lahirnya berbagai respons dari para pemikir Muslim, salah satunya adalah Said Nursi melalui gagasan epistemologi tauhid yang tertuang dalam *Risale-i Nur*. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana epistemologi tauhid dalam perspektif Said Nursi menjadi respons kritis terhadap sekularisasi pengetahuan modern serta menawarkan integrasi antara wahyu, akal, dan alam sebagai satu kesatuan sumber pengetahuan. Penelitian ini merupakan penelitian kualitatif berbasis studi kepustakaan dengan pendekatan filosofis-analitis. Data primer diperoleh dari karya Said Nursi, khususnya *Risale-i Nur*, sedangkan data sekunder diperoleh dari buku, jurnal, dan literatur ilmiah yang relevan. Teknik

analisis data dilakukan melalui analisis isi (content analysis) untuk mengkaji konsep-konsep epistemologis yang dikembangkan Nursi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa epistemologi tauhid Said Nursi menolak pemisahan antara ilmu agama dan ilmu rasional. Bagi Nursi, alam semesta adalah kitab kauniyah yang menuntun manusia kepada pengenalan Tuhan, sementara wahyu menjadi petunjuk utama dalam memahami makna di balik fenomena alam. Integrasi ini membentuk paradigma pengetahuan yang holistik, teosentris, dan bermakna. Dengan demikian, epistemologi tauhid Nursi tidak hanya menjadi kritik terhadap sekularisasi pengetahuan modern, tetapi juga menawarkan model rekonstruksi epistemologi Islam yang relevan dalam konteks kontemporer.

Kata Kunci: *Epistemologi Tauhid, Said Nursi, Sekularisasi Pengetahuan, Risale-i Nur.*

INTRODUCTION

The development of modern science has now led the world to great achievements in the fields of technology, transformation and science. (Tanjung, Akbar, 2021) Science, based on rationality and empiricism, has been able to provide convenience in various aspects of life. However, behind these achievements lies a fundamental issue that continues to be highlighted by contemporary thinkers, namely secularisation. Secularisation emerged from the modernity movement in Europe, which placed human rationality as the source of truth and removed revelation from scientific discourse. As a result, knowledge developed with a value-free world paradigm. This led to the birth of naturalism, positivism, and scientific materialism.

This condition has a broad impact on how humans understand themselves, God and nature. When knowledge is separated from the spiritual dimension, humans will begin to see themselves as the centre of reality, rather than as created beings. (Hartono, n.d.) Science will then tend to be oriented towards pragmatic usefulness rather than metaphysical truth. Thus, the secularisation of knowledge can give rise to a spiritual crisis and a loss of life orientation. In the context of Islamic thought, the secularisation of knowledge raises serious epistemological problems. (Suyani et al., 2025) Historically, Islamic scholarly tradition has placed tawhid as a fundamental principle in understanding reality. Knowledge is not only viewed as the result of human rational activity, but also as a means to know God and understand the signs of His power in the universe. Therefore, the separation between science and revelation is seen as contrary to the Islamic worldview, which is integral and holistic.

Amidst this wave of secularisation, various Muslim figures emerged who attempted to rebuild the relationship between science and religion, such as Hassan Al-Banna and Said Nursi. In her research, Yunti Aminatuz Zuhriyah highlights the contribution of Hassan Al-Banna's thinking through educational reform in the Muslim Brotherhood movement. Nevertheless, studies on Muslim thinkers' responses to the secularisation of knowledge still tend to focus on practical and social aspects, such as education and missionary movements. Meanwhile, studies that specifically examine epistemological dimensions, especially those related to the construction of knowledge based on monotheism, are still relatively limited. In fact, the issue of the secularisation of knowledge is essentially an

epistemological issue, namely the issue of the source, validity, and purpose of knowledge itself.

It is in this context that Said Nursi's ideas become relevant for further study. Said Nursi was one of the Muslim thinkers of the 20th century who lived amid intense pressures of modernity and secularisation, particularly in the socio-political context of Turkey after the collapse of the Ottoman Caliphate. (Zainuri, Habib, Khojir, 2023) His works, compiled in *Risale-i Nur*, are often understood as an effort to raise Islamic awareness among Muslims amid the challenges of modern thought. However, academic studies of Said Nursi's thought still tend to emphasise theological, spiritual and da'wah aspects, while analyses that place his thought within an epistemological framework have not been developed systematically.

Therefore, it is important to examine how the epistemology of tawhid in Said Nursi's perspective can be understood as a response to the secularisation of modern knowledge. This study is not intended to judge the rightness or wrongness of a paradigm, but rather to understand Said Nursi's framework of thinking in viewing knowledge, as well as its relevance in the context of modern epistemological problems. By placing tawhid as the starting point, this study seeks to explore how the relationship between revelation, reason, and empirical experience is positioned in Said Nursi's thinking.

This study employs a literature review method by analysing the works of Said Nursi, particularly *Risale-i Nur*, as well as relevant academic literature. This approach is expected to provide a comprehensive overview of the epistemology of tawhid in Said Nursi's thought and its contribution to the discourse on contemporary Islamic epistemology. Thus, this study is expected to enrich the study of Muslim thinkers' responses to the secularisation of knowledge, while offering an alternative perspective in understanding the relationship between science and transcendental values in the modern era.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research method using a library research approach. The research aims to examine Said Nursi's epistemological thought and analyze its relevance as a response to the secularization of modern knowledge. A descriptive-analytical approach is used to systematically interpret his ideas concerning the integration of revelation, reason, and nature within the framework of tawhīd as a unified source of knowledge. The data sources consist of primary and secondary literature. Primary sources include Said Nursi's original works, particularly the *Risale-i Nur* collection, which elaborates his theological and epistemological perspectives. Secondary sources comprise scholarly books, journal articles, and academic studies that discuss Nursi's thought, Islamic epistemology, and issues related to the secularization of knowledge in modern contexts. Data were collected through documentation techniques and analyzed using content analysis, focusing on identifying key epistemological concepts developed by Nursi and evaluating their relevance to contemporary challenges such as secularism, scientific materialism, and the dichotomy between religious

and rational sciences. To ensure the credibility of the findings, data triangulation was applied by comparing various academic sources.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Biography Of K.H Hasyim Asy'ari

Said Nursi, known as Badiuzzaman (“The Wonder of the Age”), was one of the most influential Islamic reformers of the twentieth century. He was born in Eastern Anatolia and from a young age demonstrated exceptional intellectual ability. In his teenage years, he independently read and mastered hundreds of pages of complex classical texts each day, including *Jam'al-Jawāmi*, *Sharḥ al-Mawāqif*, and *Tuhfat al-Minhāj*. This remarkable capacity quickly established him as a brilliant young scholar proficient in various Islamic disciplines. (Biografi Badiuzzaman Said Nursi) During his period of study, Nursi lived a rigorous ascetic life. He practiced intense riyāḍah (spiritual discipline) in order to train his soul and strengthen his intellect. For a time, he reportedly survived on a single piece of bread for three days, causing his body to become weak and emaciated due to his spiritual discipline. This perseverance was not merely spiritual exercise but reflected his earnest pursuit of inner clarity, as emphasized by the Illuminationist (Ishrāqī) philosophers. (Biografi Badiuzzaman Said Nursi)

Said Nursi's intellectual journey cannot be separated from the socio-political dynamics of Turkey during the transition from the Ottoman Sultanate to the secular Republic. His life history reveals a significant shift in intellectual orientation, later known as the transformation from the “Old Said” to the “New Said.” This change was not merely biographical but represented a methodological shift in how he understood and defended Islamic teachings amid the pressures of modernity. (Turner, 2005) In the phase of the Old Said, Nursi was known as a young scholar with outstanding mastery of classical Islamic sciences such as theology (kalām), Qur'anic exegesis (tafsīr), jurisprudence (fiqh), and philosophy. He actively engaged in scholarly debates and paid great attention to the reform of Islamic education. His ideas during this period emphasized the importance of integrating religious sciences with modern sciences as a strategy to address the decline of the Muslim community. (Abu-Rabi', 2008)

He sought the path to truth not through a mystical withdrawal from reality, but by harmonizing intellect, heart, and spirit, following the method of Imām al-Ghazālī and Imām Rabbānī. This transformation gave rise to his early works such as *Qathrah*, *Habbah*, and *Lama'āt*. Nursi's missionary and intellectual efforts were not without obstacles. He faced severe political pressure, particularly during the period of secularization in modern Turkey. He was repeatedly imprisoned, exiled, and kept under strict surveillance. (Vahide, 2005.) He even survived several poisoning attempts, yet he continued his mission of preaching faith and the Qur'an without diminishing resolve. His struggle demonstrated that his knowledge was not aimed at worldly interests but at total devotion to religion.

In the phase of the New Said, Nursi's approach became more contemplative, Qur'anic, and spiritual. He made the Qur'an the central focus of his intellectual orientation and distanced himself from ideological polemics. His method shifted from open debate to cultivating awareness of tawḥīd through deep

reflection on both the cosmic signs (*āyāt kawniyyah*) and the Qur'anic verses (*āyāt qur'āniyyah*). (Vahide, 2005.) Nursi's engagement with Turkish modernity is evident in the way he responded to secularism not by rejecting modernity outright, but by reinterpreting faith in a manner capable of addressing the challenges of modern rationality. He did not reject science; rather, he demonstrated that science strengthens the evidence for the existence and oneness of God. (Abu-Rabi', 2008) In this context, Nursi viewed modernity as an epistemological challenge. Secularism had separated knowledge from God, causing humanity to lose spiritual orientation in understanding reality. He sought to restore awareness that the universe consists of God's signs that must be read through the perspective of *tawhīd*. (nizar, 2002)

From this intellectual and spiritual struggle emerged his monumental work, *Risale-i Nur*. This work is not a conventional Qur'anic commentary but a thematic exposition on faith, *tawhīd*, the afterlife, and the meaning of creation through a rational-spiritual approach suited to the modern context. *Risale-i Nur* was written under intense political pressure. Nursi was frequently exiled, imprisoned, and closely monitored by the authorities. Yet it was precisely in this isolation that his profound reflections emerged, forming the core of his thought on the importance of faith as a fortress against the tide of secularization. Nursi's students later secretly disseminated *Risale-i Nur* through handwritten copies, turning it into an underground intellectual movement that spread awareness of *tawhīd* among Turkish society, which was undergoing the desacralization of religious life. (Turner, 2005)

Thus, the transformation from the Old Said to the New Said illustrates a shift in missionary strategy from intellectual-political activism to Qur'an-based spiritual formation. His strong intellectual background, engagement with Turkish modernity, and the context of religious repression formed the historical setting that gave birth to *Risale-i Nur* as a spiritual-intellectual response to the crisis of faith in the modern era.

The Epistemology of Tawhid According to Said Nursi

The epistemology of *tawhid* in Said Nursi's thought originated from his concern about the intellectual and spiritual situation of Muslims in the modern era. From the 19th century to the early 20th century, Muslims experienced the pressures of colonialism and the expansion of secularisation, which displaced religious messages from the public sphere and education. In Turkey itself, political and social modernisation was carried out radically, separating religion from scientific structures. In this context, the epistemological concept of *tawhid* formulated by Said Nursi in his work *Risale-i Nur* emerged as an effort to restore the integration between knowledge, faith and human spiritual experience.

For Said Nursi, the crisis facing Muslims is not merely an economic or political issue, but an epistemological one, namely the loss of awareness that knowledge has divine roots and that all reality is a manifestation of the names of God (*asma'ul husna*). He sees that the secularisation of knowledge has given rise to a materialistic view of the universe. (Aydin, 2019) Nature is no longer understood

as a sign pointing to God, but as an independent system without divine intervention. According to Said Nursi, this perspective can give rise to intellectual arrogance, spiritual disconnection, and moral nihilism, thus requiring an epistemological formula capable of restoring spiritual foundations in knowledge.

The concept of tawhid in Said Nursi's epistemology is not limited to the theological statement that God is One, but is a philosophical principle that forms the basic structure of all intellectual activity. Tawhid is not only at the pinnacle of faith, but also the foundation for understanding nature, organising knowledge and interpreting experience. In other words, tawhid is a paradigm of knowledge. Tawhid is the lens that determines how a person views reality. Therefore, in Said Nursi's perspective, the epistemology of tawhid is a way of acquiring knowledge with the awareness that everything has an ontological relationship with God as the source of absolute truth.

According to Nursi, revelation, nature and the human self are epistemic objects that illuminate each other and cannot be separated. Revelation provides metaphysical and normative guidance, nature is a concrete manifestation of God's greatness, while the human self is an internal mirror that enables reflection and self-awareness. In his work *Risale-i Nur*, Said Nursi emphasises that reading nature through the lens of monotheism is the intellectual and spiritual duty of every Muslim. Nature must be understood as cosmic letters that explain the names of God. (Azzahra & Rosie, 2024) In this context, the epistemology of tawhid requires humans to not only observe nature empirically, but also to grasp the spiritual dimension behind it. In this regard, Said Nursi developed an integrative approach that combines revelation, reason, and empirical experience.

He rejected the anti-rationalist and anti-scientific views often attributed to religious traditions. For Said Nursi, reason is a divine gift that must be in harmony with revelation. When reason is used without the guidance of revelation, it is easy to stray into relativism and materialistic bias. And when faith is separated from reason and science, it becomes fragile dogmatism. Therefore, the epistemology of tawhid is a harmonious synthesis between reason and revelation, where both work within the framework of awareness of the oneness of God. Said Nursi also emphasised that every field of knowledge has a spiritual dimension. (Aydin, 2019) For example, physics not only explains the motion of objects, but also demonstrates God's omnipotence in the laws of nature; biology not only talks about life, but also demonstrates the wisdom of creation; astronomy not only studies the motion of planets, but also reveals the majesty of the Creator who rules the cosmos.

Said Nursi also uses faith as the light of knowledge that enables one to understand reality correctly. In *Risale-i Nur*, Said Nursi uses the metaphor of light, where reason is the eye, but faith is the light that enables the eye to see. Without that light, reason only captures the surface of reality and fails to see its metaphysical essence. Said Nursi also emphasises the importance of wisdom as the ultimate goal of knowledge. Knowledge without wisdom can breed arrogance,

but knowledge combined with tawhid will result in existential awareness, humility, and closeness to God.

Therefore, the ultimate goal of science does not lie in power, control, or domination of nature, but in ma'rifatullah, which is a deep understanding of God.(Fitrowan, 2023) From a methodological perspective, Said Nursi's epistemology of tawhid combines argumentative-philosophical and Sufi-reflective styles; he does not separate reason from spirituality. Said Nursi created a synthesis by reviving spirituality through logic. Said Nursi's synthesis of logic and spirituality shows that the epistemology of tawhid is not an anti-modern or regressive system of knowledge, but rather a paradigm capable of engaging with the challenges of the times. Said Nursi recognised that modern science has methodological strengths that cannot be ignored, particularly in explaining natural phenomena systematically and rationally. However, these strengths become problematic when detached from the orientation of tawhid.(Sempo, 2017) Therefore, he did not reject modern science, but sought to redirect its goals and orientation so that it remained within the framework of servitude to God.

In Said Nursi's view, the epistemology of tawhid serves as a correction to the basic assumptions of modern science, which tends to separate facts from values, and empirical reality from metaphysical meaning. This separation gives rise to what he calls 'knowledge without spirit', namely science that is able to explain how something works, but fails to answer why something exists and what its purpose is. As a result, modern humans experience existential alienation, because the knowledge they possess no longer provides direction and meaning in life. Furthermore, Said Nursi emphasised that the secularisation of knowledge has shaped the intellectual character of modern humans, who tend to be anthropocentric. Humans place themselves at the centre of reality and the measure of truth, while God is marginalised from the structure of knowledge. In tauhid epistemology, this kind of perspective is considered a fundamental error, because it places creatures in a position that is not rightfully theirs. Tauhid demands that God remain the centre of knowledge orientation, while humans play the role of subjects who read and interpret His signs in the universe.

Said Nursi argues that there is no such thing as completely value-free knowledge, because every knowledge system always departs from certain metaphysical assumptions, whether conscious or unconscious. Modern science, despite claiming neutrality, is actually built on secular assumptions that deny God's role in reality. The epistemology of tawhid seeks to reopen this metaphysical dimension and emphasise that recognition of God is not an obstacle to objectivity, but rather the foundation for a more complete understanding of reality.(Ayathurrahman & Shodiq, 2023)

In the context of education and knowledge transmission, Said Nursi's epistemology of tawhid has significant implications. He believes that the modern secular education system tends to produce individuals who are intellectually intelligent but spiritually dry. Knowledge is taught as a collection of information and technical skills without any connection to divine values. As a result, knowledge loses its transformational function in shaping human character and

moral consciousness. The epistemology of tawhid requires that the educational process not only transfer knowledge, but also instil an awareness of tawhid as the basis for thinking and acting.

Said Nursi offered an educational model that integrated religious and rational sciences within a single framework of monotheism. For him, the dichotomy between religious knowledge and general knowledge is a legacy of secular epistemology that must be overcome. Religious knowledge without science has the potential to give rise to anti-progress attitudes, while science without religion has the potential to give rise to moral and spiritual crises. Therefore, tauhid epistemology encourages the reconstruction of the Islamic education system so that it can produce a generation that is faithful, rational, and morally responsible.

Furthermore, Said Nursi's epistemology of tawhid also has a strong ethical dimension. Knowledge is not understood as a tool of domination, but as a trust that must be used for the common good. Within the framework of tawhid, humans do not have absolute power over nature, but rather act as caliphs who are responsible for maintaining the balance and harmony of creation. Thus, the epistemology of tawhid provides an ethical basis for the sustainable and equitable development of science. Said Nursi also emphasised that the crisis of modern knowledge ultimately leads to a crisis of meaning. When science is no longer connected to the purpose of creation, humans lose their existential orientation. The epistemology of tawhid seeks to restore knowledge to its original purpose, namely as a means of knowing God and understanding humanity's place within the cosmic order. By knowing God through knowledge, humanity not only gains understanding but also discovers the profound meaning of life.

Within this framework, Said Nursi viewed faith not as an obstacle to freedom of thought, but as a prerequisite for true intellectual freedom. Faith frees humans from slavery to materialism, lust, and power, allowing the mind to work clearly and responsibly. Without faith, the mind is easily trapped in narrow pragmatic and ideological interests. (Ihsan & Rahmadi, 2022) Therefore, the epistemology of tawhid makes faith the foundation of intellectual and moral freedom. Said Nursi's epistemology of tawhid is also relevant in the context of dialogue between Islam and modernity. He shows that Islam does not have to choose between accepting modernity wholesale or rejecting it entirely. Through the epistemology of tawhid, modernity can be critiqued, filtered, and directed to be in harmony with divine values. Thus, Said Nursi's thinking offers a constructive middle ground between tradition and change.

In facing the challenges of globalisation and contemporary scientific developments, the epistemology of tawhid provides a reflective framework that enables Muslims to actively participate in scientific developments without losing their spiritual identity. Tawhid becomes a guiding principle that ensures scientific progress does not distance humans from God, but rather brings them closer to Him. Thus, the epistemology of tawhid is not only historically relevant, but also

has actual significance in addressing the problems of knowledge in the modern era.

Ultimately, Said Nursi's epistemology of tawhid asserts that true knowledge cannot be separated from values, meaning, and the purpose of life. Science that loses its dimension of tawhid will result in material progress without spiritual maturity. Conversely, science rooted in tawhid will give birth to a civilisation that balances intellectual progress and spiritual depth. This is Said Nursi's main contribution to contemporary Islamic epistemology, which places tawhid at the centre of human knowledge and life.

CONCLUSION

This study affirms that Said Nursi's epistemology of tawhīd constitutes a fundamental response to the secularization of modern knowledge, which separates knowledge from divine values. Nursi argues that the modern crisis stems from the way humans understand the source and purpose of knowledge. By establishing tawhīd as an epistemic foundation, he rejects the dichotomy between religious and rational sciences and emphasizes that revelation, nature, and the humanself form an integrated system of signs leading to the knowledge of God. A key finding of this research shows that in the *Risale-i Nur*, Nursi constructs a theocentric paradigm of knowledge through the integration of reason, revelation, and empirical experience. Nature is understood as *kitāb kawniyyah* (the cosmic book) and revelation as *kitāb qawliyyah* (the scriptural book), both of which mutually illuminate one another. Nursi's critique of secularization is not a rejection of science, but a correction of scientific assumptions that detach facts from meaning. He accepts scientific methodology but reorients it toward a consciousness of servitude to God.

In terms of implications, Nursi's epistemology of tawhīd is highly relevant for reconstructing education and the transmission of knowledge so that knowledge regains its moral and spiritual function. This study also contributes to academic scholarship on Nursi by positioning the *Risale-i Nur* as a project of Islamic epistemological reconstruction that engages dialogically with modernity and opens pathways for developing a tawhīd-based paradigm of knowledge in contemporary contexts.

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