# A Critique of the Turkish Education System During the Early Republic Period (1923-1943) Based on Syed Ahmet Arvasi's Idea

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## Abstract

States established as nation-states in the 19th and 20th centuries have used education to defend their principles of existence and legitimacy. In this context, the Republic of Turkey, founded on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, has made great efforts to transform its people into a modern nation-state. The most important tool of the state in this effort has undoubtedly been education. Since the basis of the republican ideology is secularism, the basic building block in education has also been secularism. The education system has been the most important part of secular modernization and the construction of a new national identity. New and secular values that form the national identity have been transferred and transmitted to new generations through education. In this context, education policies have been under the influence of the new regime for a long time since the founding of the republic. This study has drawn from Syed Ahmed Arvasi's ideas in analyzing the historical development of education in Turkey, and identified that problems such as moral corruption, anarchy, lack of national consciousness, and lack of personality in today's society are closely associated with the secular education policies of the Republican period. In moving forward, the study supports Arvasi's idea of educating the younger generation according to the principles of Turkish-Islamic culture. Future studies may explore further the viability of Arvasi's ideas and how they can be implemented in the formal system of education in Turkey.

**Keywords:** *modernization, nation-state, secularism, Turkish Education System, Syed Ahmet Arvasi.*

## INTRODUCTION

In 1923 Atatürk officially proclaimed the sovereignty of the Republic of Turkey as a nation-state. For Atatürk, the idea of an Islamic state was a symbol of backwardness, and maintaining Turkey as an Islamic state meant perpetuating Turkey's backwardness. He wanted Turkey to get rid of backwardness and become a modern country. According to him, the only way to live as a developed and civilized nation is to become a modern nation-state (Ahmad, 1993). *"Turks were a great nation before they accepted Islam as their religion. However, after accepting this religion, the national feelings of the Turkish nation disappeared. Religion numbs the national excitement of the Turks"* (İnan, 2010, p.44). Thus, he built a new Turkey from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire and made a tremendous effort to modernize the country. As a result, he took on the difficult and shocking task of destroying centuries-old cultures and replacing them with a West (Mango, 2002). It has been the most basic way of adopting these main principles of modernization in education to society. One of the main missions of the new state is to bring the country to the level of contemporary civilization (Heper, 2011). The cadre who founded the Republic emphasized that the shortest way to reach this civilization system is through modern education (Adem, 2008). *Madrasahs* (Muslim religious schools) were closed by the new government and the institutions providing religious education became linked to the Ministry of National Education. Religious schools were an obstacle to being modern and Western for the government. Instead of religious schools, the government opened schools where modern sciences and secular world views were taught. (Cagaptay, 2006). However, there were not only Islamic courses in the curriculum of *Madrasahs.* In addition to Islamic sciences such as the Quran, Hadith, Tafsir, and Kalam, there were courses on mental sciences such as Calculation, Geometry, Logic, Wisdom, Medicine, and Philosophy (Şangal, 2003). Yet, according to Atatürk, one of the reasons for the backwardness of the Ottoman Empire was the insufficient education in the *Madrasahs.* According to him, national language, national history, and national art were not learned in these institutions. These institutions it was not suitable for the development of national culture and had to be removed. (Aytaç,1984; Ozdemir, 2013).

The debate about *Madrasahs* started during the *Tanzimat* period, which was the modernization period of the Ottoman Empire. In this period, the responsibility of not being able to reach Western science and technology was attributed to *Madrasahs*. For example, according to Sadrettin Celâl Antel (1890-1954), *Madrasahs* are centers of ignorance, bigotry, and conflict that prevent all kinds of innovation. Those who prevent European science and technology from entering the country are *Madrasah* teachers. During the *Tanzimat* period, the mentality, method, science, and technique of the West could not enter the country (Antel, 1940). However, the reason for this was not the *Madrasahs* and the ulama as it was said. Educator Ali Suavi (1839-1878), who was born and died in the *Tanzimat* period, received education and training both in *Madrasahs* and in new-method schools. Suavi, who is an open and forward-thinking person, bases his ideas and the justification of his foresight on religious-based education. According to him, being hostile to

the new is not by Islam (Ülken, 1992). As Suavi said, Islam has never been against science and innovation, on the contrary, it has tried to reconcile religion with reason and philosophy (Ülken, 1957). In other words, the reason for not being successful in innovations is neither religion, *Madrasah* nor ulama. It is the discussion of innovations in terms of functioning and form. As a result, Ottoman intellectuals failed because they presented innovations that were culturally different, completely outside the reality of the society they came from, and contradicting it (İhsanoğlu, 2022). As can be seen, the reason for the lack of progress in education during the *Tanzimat* period and the lagging behind the Ottoman Empire was not *Madrasahs*, as Atatürk claimed.

Consequently, Atatürk established a solid security wall between religion and the state. Turkey has become one of the most ideologically secular Muslim-majority states in the twentieth century. Ataturk, who regulated the relationship between religion and politics based on secularism, limited religion to the private sphere and then mandated independence from religion in government, education, and public policy (Cagaptay, 2017). In this way, education was placed on a secular basis and the most important feature of modern education was fulfilled. With secularization in education, a new individual was tried to be created and the identity of this new individual was constructed on a secular basis, not based on religion as in the Ottoman Empire (Çelik, 2001). As a result, religion was removed from public life and actively suppressed in public life. In this context, education was completely secularized. (Gungor, 1987).

## EARLY REPUBLICAN EDUCATION POLICIES

In November 1928, the Arabic letters used by the entire Islamic world were removed and replaced with Latin letters. The government replaced Arabic and Persian words with purely Turkish words taken from dialects, other Turkic languages, and ancient texts. Words of European origin remained intact even a few new ones were imported to fill in the gaps left by their Arabic and Persian equivalents. With the change of the alphabet, there was rapid progress in the translation activity. The journal *Tercüme* (Translate) was first published in 1940, under the auspices of the state-supported Translation Bureau, to introduce the best of world literature to the readership. Although the publication of translations based on Western models has continued since the mid-nineteenth century, this was the first time it became part of government policy. This policy aimed to contribute to the development of both language and national culture by conveying the universal humanist values of European literature to a wider audience (Raw, 2011). To justify the idea of alphabet reform, Atatürk argued that it was difficult to read and understand the Arabic letters. However, as Bernard Lewis observed, the main purpose of this reform was to create a modern and Western society and to cut the ties of Turkish people with their Islamic past (Lewis, 2001).

The philosophy of popular scientism, serving as the Deus ex machina, shaped Mustafa Kemal's view of Islam and formed the general framework of secularism in his newly founded

country. He fully agreed with the Italian orientalist Leone Caetani (1869-1935) that the Revelation was a myth invented by the Muslim tradition. According to him, the Qur'an represented Muhammad's composition; that the Prophet adopted many practices from Judaism, and that the driving force behind Islamic expansion was not religious zeal but the rapacity of the Arab tribesmen. He reflected this point of view in his textbooks. (Hanioğlu, 2011).

The last primary school curriculum change in the period before the Republic of Turkey was made in 1913 and 1914 (Erdoğan, 2011). Although the weekly course hours vary according to this program published in these years, Qur'an, Morals, Recitation, Memorization, Writing, Consumables and Syntax, History, Geography, Calculation, Items Lessons, Agriculture, Handicrafts, Painting, Music, and Physical Training were the courses taught in primary schools. The first curriculum changes after the proclamation of the Republic showed itself in 1924 as the "Curriculum Program of Primary Schools" (Binbaşıoğlu, 2005). First of all, the values belonging to the Ottoman State were removed from the programs and books, and values suitable for the mission and vision of the Republic were to be placed in their places. With this program change, some of the religion lessons were completely removed from the schools, and the lesson hours of some of them were reduced (Başgöz &Wilson, 1968).

The commission established for the regulation of the education curriculum and textbooks in the Republican era first trivialized the Ottoman administration in history textbooks. Later, the board added concepts such as civilization, modernity, and secularism to the textbooks (Doğan, 2011). When we examine the history textbooks of the Republican period, the first thing that stands out is that the information about the religion of Islam is incomplete or incorrect in the Islamic history sections. For example, textbooks on the history of Islam in the 1930s defined the Quran as "the book in which Muhammad lay down principles." The most striking detail in this definition is that the Quran, which is accepted by Muslims as the word of Allah, is called a work written by the Prophet Muhammad(ﷺ). Also, it was stated in the textbooks that the provisions of the Quran are not eternal, but are subject to change. Another example is in the History II textbook in 1923. In the book, there is the phrase Escape from Mecca to Medina for the Hijra event (Küçükali, 2018).

When evaluated as generals, these books represented the perspective of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder of the Turkish Republic, towards Islam. A section in the high school textbook prepared under his supervision is as follows:

> "Arab-Turkish struggle," in which "torrents of Bedouins overflowing from the Arabian deserts moved toward cultivated and prosperous [Turkish cities] through Iranian valleys." As he later explained in more straightforward terms, Islam was an Arab faith and a vehicle for Arab domination: "The Turks, too, had been a great nation before accepting the religion of the Arabs." However, the "Arab religion... loosened the national ties of the Turkish nation" and "benumbed national feelings and enthusiasm for the nation, because the aim of the religion established by Muhammad

prompted an Arab nationalist policy...Those who accepted Muhammad's religion had to suppress their identities and devote their lives to the exaltation of the name of Allah everywhere... Under these circumstances, the Turkish nation resembled those who commit the Qur'an to memory without- understanding the meaning of a single word of it and thus become senile" (Hanioğlu, 2011, pp.131-132).

The following observation of British journalist Grace Ellison (1880-1935), who came to Turkey to understand the Islamic consciousness of young people who grew up with the secular education system established by Atatürk, is very important:

Traveling from Konia to Adana with the Inspector of Schools who was the intelligent and kindly guide provided by the Government, by chance I used the words "your prophet Mahomet." He sat up to give more emphasis to his words and answered, "Our prophet is our Ghazi: we have finished with that individual from Arabia. The religion of Mahomet was all very well for Arabia, but it is not for us."

The point of view of an inspector of schools was important, especially about religion, "But have you no belief?" I asked. "Yes," he answered, "in the Ghazi, science, the future of my country and myself." "But God?" I asked. "Who can know anything about God?" he answered. "There is science, and the power of good and evil, of the rest no one knows anything definite." …

"What have we to learn from the Arabian (he would not call him prophet) of the desert?" went on my companion. "I, inspector of schools, can I teach my pupils nonsense? The Ghazi, who has inspired the whole organization of our education, says: 'Teach the truth and prove it by science; teach your pupils those subjects which are going to be of use to them in life; teach them order, method, and observation; teach them the difference between right ' and wrong; to know themselves; to believe in themselves and to rely on themselves.' That is not the program of 'the Arab,' but the Ghazi our prophet" (Ellison,1928, pp.188-189).

As can be seen, the education system in the early republican period was quite far from the religion of Islam and Turkish culture. Even though the mistakes and deficiencies in the textbooks were corrected over time, the school curriculum from primary school to high school was far from Turkish-Islamic civilization. As a result, young people could not learn enough about their culture, history, and religion at school. Moreover, they moved away from Turkish culture and religion and,

consequently, were obliged to adopt Western ideas. However, Islam has a deep importance in Turkish society. With such practices, society has tried to be secularized, removed from religion, and separated from its past identity. As a result of these policies, traditional Turkish and Islamic culture has been tried to be removed from the society and education system. However, since the basic ideology of the Turkish nation is Islam, the Turkish nation is inherently related to Islam and strongly opposes such practices. Thus, many thinkers criticized this system and tried to produce alternative models to protect the religion and culture of Turkish society. One of these thinkers Syed Ahmet Arvasi advocates an education suitable for Turkish-Islamic culture. According to his understanding of education, students should not break away from their own culture and religion of Islam. For this, he wrote many books and gave conferences.

## SYED AHMET ARVASI'S SUGGESTIONS

Arvasi was a writer and philosopher of Kurdish origin. His title of "Syed" denotes that he was a descendant of the Prophet Muhammed (ﷺ). Arvasi's ancestors were Arabs who came to Anatolia from Baghdad during the reign of the second Ottoman Sultan Orhan Gazi (1281-1362). His ancestors settled in Arvas village south of Lake Van, therefore they were known as Arvasiler (those who are from Arvas) (Perçemkaya, 1990). As mentioned earlier, Arvasi's family was of Arab origin, and they were very loyal to Ottoman rule. Arvasi's grandfather Sheikh Abdülhakim Arvasi (1865-1943) went on a pilgrimage to Makkah with his followers in the 1920s, during the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The people in Arabia whom he encountered during the pilgrimage journey told him to stay among the Arabs, and that they would build a *Madrasah* for him, and even meet all his financial needs. They told him that the Ottoman Empire was already dead, and there could be no return to its glorious age. Arvasi's grandfather refused their entreaties, saying "If only two Turks remain in the world, one will be me." (Arvasi,1993, p.75). Arvasi's grandfather remained loyal to Turkishness and Islam until the end of his life. Arvasi was born into such a family environment, being proud of being related to the family of the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), and of his ancestors' achievements and contributions to Islam and the Ottomans (Polat,2021).

Arvasi graduated from Erzurum Teachers High School in 1952 and began his career as a teacher at a high school in Doğanbeyli town (Özdemir, 2006). He worked there for two more years and was accepted to the Department of Pedagogy, the Ankara Gazi University. However, he joined the army to complete his military service before starting his university education (Arvasi,1993). After completing his military service, Arvasi went to Ankara to start his university education. While studying at the Department of Pedagogy he also graduated from the Faculty of Theology. He graduated in 1958 and later worked as a pedagogy teacher in Van, Balıkesir, Bursa, and Istanbul in the 1960s (Perçemkaya, 1999). During this decade, a political group popularly called "Leftists" emerged, who propagated the ideology of communism and socialism. This group was antithetical to Arvasi's ideas, and he tried to protect the youth from the foreign ideologies of communism and socialism. As a result of the efforts of the Leftists, Arvasi was fired from a teaching job at the Van

Alpaslan Primary School and was transferred to the Savaştepe Teachers School in Balıkesir. (Duberstein, 2020).

In the 1970s, the spread of communist and socialist ideologies began to aggravate political chaos in Turkey, and student groups who propagated these views started to protest at universities. These student groups envisage themselves as a force to change the political structure of Turkey (Başaran, 2017). In 1975, Arvasi started to work as a pedagogy lecturer at the Atatürk Education Institute, which was shaken by such political conflicts. Arvasi and his classes were also affected by boycotts and students' political activities, which resulted in constant chaos in the Institute. As a lecturer knowing the ideas of both Eastern and Western sociologists, psychologists, and philosophers, he gave lectures to students at the Institute and explained their main agenda. Arvasi wanted his students to have the ideals of Islam, thus he provided continuous lectures and organized conferences to enlighten his students about Islamic ethics and worldview (Özdemir, 2006). During this conference, he supported the concept of social race, which is defined as the consciousness of the unity of the individuals, families, classes, and strata of a nation as a whole, regardless of their ethnicities. Common culture, shared geography, traditional lifestyle, and common struggles bring the individuals and members of the nation together, both spiritually and physically. People who live in the same culture and share the same fate begin to resemble each other. In other words, the social, cultural, economic, and political integrations, as a sociological necessity, result in the emergence of a social race over time. Arvasi said the Turkish social race was easily formed in Turkey because it comprised pre-existing and deeply rooted socio-cultural phenomena. Conversely, biological racism dissolved these cultural artifacts, dividing Turkish society, whereas the concept of a social race has a unifying and integrative character. During this period of teaching, the most important problem for Arvasi was the weakness of the educational system in schools. As Arvasi detected, the curriculum in schools was far from Turkish-Islamic culture and civilization. It covered Greco-Latin cultures and civilizations instead of teaching the Turkish-Islamic civilization elements to Turkish children. As a result, young people could not learn enough about their culture, history, and religion at school. Moreover, they moved away from Turkish culture and religion and, consequently, were obliged to adopt Western ideas (Arvasi, 2008).

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Thus, he organized various talks, discussions, and conferences for young people to explain the elements of Turkish-Islamic culture. Also, teachers and school administrators attended these conferences (Özdemir, 2006).

Besides, Arvasi decided to write books because he thought conferences would not be enough to provide education about Turkish-Islamic culture and history to a wider audience of Turkish youth. His first book on this issue was *Eğitim Sosyolojisi* (Educational Sociology), in which he argued that students should learn about national, cultural, and religious values. Arvasi wrote another book called *Kendini Arayan İnsan* (Man Searching for Himself). Arvasi penned *İnsan ve İnsan Ötesi* (Man and Beyond Man) as a continuation of his earlier published book Man Searching for Himself. In this study, Arvasi investigated the reasons why the positive sciences caused people to deny religion. Moreover, he published a book called *İlm-i Hal* (Catechism) in which he divided human life into periods of childhood, youth, and old age, and explained how Islamic rules and measures should be practiced in each period. He examined many issues such as mind, religion, and existence, and also discussed the problems of young people in Turkey. He also emphasized the importance of developing national awareness among students. To achieve this, the teachers also should know and be able to explain Turkish history, traditions, and religion to their students (Polat, 2021).

Arvasi who claimed that educational reforms during the Republican era had deprived the youth of their religion, culture, and history suggested that the approach to save Turkish youth from the wrong education project was to educate them based on Turkish Islamic culture. He also emphasized that schools should have a national curriculum that includes Turkish history, geography, national culture, and its material and spiritual values (Arvasi, 2008).

Arvasi saw religious education as the most natural right of man and argued that this education is extremely necessary for both the individual and society (Arvasi, 1991). According to him, the benefits of religious education are as follows:

1- Religious education contributes positively to the mental health of the child and the development of emotion and excitement.
2- Religious education teaches people the value and superiority of their life by teaching them belief in Allah.
3- Religious education gives the individual some principles to organize his life. Thus, a person will be in peace and harmony in his life.
4- Religious education can be considered a socialization tool and can guide one's self-knowledge. A healthy and adequate religious education positively affects individuals to live in harmony and cooperation with members of other religions.
5- Religious education not only promotes goodness, social justice, and solidarity but also prevents social discomfort and disorder.
6- Religious education deals with many issues of education based on the feeling of love found in human nature (Arvas, 2020).

Arvasi believes that the state's indifference to religion and its failure to implement a real religious education will have very dangerous consequences for the people. According to him, if official religious education and teaching are prohibited or neglected, informal religious education begins. In a country that lacks a strong, solid, sincere, and serious religious education and the institutions that support it, society and the state suffer greatly. If the state does not take care of its own society and social institutions, false religious merchants fill the market. That's when young people turn away from the pure and obvious sources of the holy religion and fall into the clutches of superstitious lies in the name of religion. The way to save our religious life, bring the society together with the same beliefs and moral values, and revive the Turkish-Islamic civilization is through a sincere, serious, and sufficient religious education (Arvasi, 1991).

Arvasi emphasized that the scope of religious culture and ethics courses should be reconsidered at a meeting he attended with the National Education Council. He explained his thoughts on this subject at the meeting as follows:

> Religious culture is taught to students in our schools, however, unfortunately, religious education is not taught. The Ministry of National Education needs to think about this and work on this issue. If our government does not provide formal religious education, then informal religious education and training will occur. This issue accordingly has a political and ideological dimension. If the children of this country do not receive religious education in their own country, they can go abroad. Instead of learning religion in those countries, they can adopt the political and ideological ideas of foreign countries and bring them to our country. Some politicians argue that to enter the European Economic Community we need to be modern and Western. According to them, if there were religious lessons in schools, our country would not be modern and Western, and thus they want to abolish religious lessons. However, there are religious courses taught in the European countries which are taken as an example for Turkey to follow. For example, England has two hours of religious lessons per week, and it is compulsory. In Germany, there are three hours of religious lessons per week and one hour of this is given in church. Moreover, ninety percent of religious education in Germany is compulsory in schools. Consequently, Europeans are not in a situation to accuse us of putting religious lessons in schools. I think it is a must to teach religion in schools (Arvasi, 2008a, p.380).

The main reason why Arvasi was interested in religious education and gave such importance to education was related to the subject of young people being influenced by communist

and socialist movements. Young people affected by these ideas saw themselves as a force that would change Turkey's political structure. According to Arvasi, the school curriculum should be prepared according to Turkish-Islamic culture so that young people are not affected by foreign and revolutionary ideas (Polat, 2021).

As it can be understood from Arvasi's thoughts above, the most reasonable education he recommends for Turkish youth is one that includes Islamic education. For Arvasi, another important issue in education is culture. Arvasi believes in the existence of a close relationship between education and national culture. He states that educators should seek the greatest support from national cultural institutions and values while continuing their educational activities. According to him, every nation has to protect the values that ensure its national unity. Nations that do not own their history and culture become imitators of other nations and are condemned. For this reason, our history, geography, national culture, and spiritual wealth should be taken as the basis for determining the aims of national education, preparing programs, and organizing education (Arvasi, 1995).

According to him, for a successful education, it is necessary to adapt to the national social structure and preserve the national culture. Two aspects of education are never indispensable. Education has to be both national and contemporary where both national and moral values should be protected and modern technology and science should be followed (Arvasi, 1996). He emphasizes that the school, which is an educational institution, should do the following in terms of the development of national culture:

1- The structure of the school should not conflict with the national culture in which it was born and developed. If the school fails to do this, conflict occurs between the public and the state.
2- A curriculum should be determined by preserving the culture and values built by the Turkish nation.
3- The education given at school should develop the young generations on a universal scale and should never alienate them from their own culture (Arvasi, 1995).

As can be seen, Arvasi advocates an education suitable for Turkish Islamic culture. According to his understanding of education, students should not break away from their own culture and religion of Islam.

**CONCLUSION**

During the early Republic period, Islamic elements were destroyed, and the new Turkish society was built based on Western and secular values. Consequently, a secular Western education model was adopted in Turkey as its formal education. Secular reforms in the education system resulted in the younger generations drifting away from the Turkish-Islamic culture. The youth were not educated about their culture, history, and religion in schools, but instead received inaccurate information about them. Eventually they moved away from their original Turkish culture and religion while gradually adopting Western ideas and values. This has led to the birth of a new generation with a positivist and materialist mindset raised by the state. According to Arvasi, these changes have posed many difficulties to practice religion in Turkish society for years. Parents have tried to teach religion to their children at home out of their own efforts, but due to the dichotomy between what they learned in their secular school and what was taught by their parents at home, the parents' efforts were of no avail. As a result, many youths lost their religious affiliation and became secular. This study has presented Arvasi's ideas to return to Islam as their religion and reclaim the Turkish culture that is embedded in the past Turkish-Islamic practices and civilization. Throughout his teaching profession and through his writings, Arvasi has attempted to enlighten and educate the society and youth of this. Future studies may explore further his ideas to transform the current Turkey system of education.

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