In a landscape where many religious and cultural movements were active, three religious movements emerged to transform late Ottoman and modern Turkish society. The movements emerged in a clear chronological sequence. Each created disruptive changes in Turkish religious culture within the relatively short time span of a few decades. Each of them also has an ongoing history. It is important not to overlook that point: the recent history of the oldest of the three movements includes many forms of activity—such as expansion into electronic media or business ventures—for which the newest of the three is better known. Singly and collectively, these movements tell us a great deal about how Islamic religious movements have changed in their forms of self-expression and organization during the past two centuries. This is probably the most important lesson to learn from comparing the three of them. Historians with a comparative awareness of early U.S. history will be tempted to liken these movements to the Great AWakenings of that period. The comparison is not misleading, yet it is also not very helpful to those who have not studied early U.S. religious history.

Full appreciation of Fethullah Gülen requires contemplating the Hizmet movement in the historical perspective from which it emerged and in a global frame of comparison. Carter Vaughn Findley, professor of History at Ohio State University, first examines Hizmet as the latest of the three most influential Ottoman and Turkish religious renewals since 1800. Over two centuries, the evolution from the movements of Mevlana Halid and Said Nursi to that of Fethullah Gülen vastly expanded the repertory of options for organization and action. In the past few decades, the expansion of horizons from local to national to global created the added potential for teachings of Gülen to inspire the world of the twenty-first century as profoundly as the world of the twentieth century was inspired by those of Gandhi.
In Islamic terms, the movements respond to the pious expectation that every age will have its mujaddid, or “renewer.” In an environment where many religious movements coexisted, it is not hard to see that these three movements were the “renewals” of their respective times. It may be harder to understand how they achieved the impact that they did. For a historian, this is an interesting question to contemplate.

The three movements are those launched by Mevlana Halid, Said Nursi, and Fethullah Gülen. Together, they carry Islamic religious culture of the late Ottoman and Turkish lands from the last great movement launched within the historical forms of the mystical orders into a new age that left the old forms behind to seek new modes of organization and action. Ultimately, this search produced results of significance not only for Muslims but for people of all the religions and all the world.

MEVLANA HALID AND THE HALIDIYE MOVEMENT

Mevlana Halid, known in Arabic as Shaykh Khalid, lived from 1776 to 1827, but the critical years for launching his movement were from 1811 to 1827, a period of less than two decades. Born a Kurd near Shahrazur in Ottoman Iraq, he studied there and in Sulaymaniyya. Among Kurds, the Islamic mystical brotherhoods (tarikat), whose followers are referred to synonymously by the terms sufi and dervish, were the only institutions that bridged tribal divisions. Early on, Halid was initiated into the Kadirî order, then the dominant order in Kurdistan, and perhaps other orders. But then he did something exceptional: he went to study in India, where he was also initiated into the Naqshbandi (in Turkish, Nakşibendi) order in its reformist, mujaddidi form, founded by the Imam Rabbani, Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1624), a religious reformer recognized as the mujaddid of the second Islamic millennium. Halid’s Indian teacher not only trained him to teach religious sciences such as Qur’an commentary (tafsir) and prophetic traditions (hadîth) but also appointed him as his deputy (khalifa) to spread the mujaddidi form of the Naqshbandi Sufi movement in Kurdistan. Halid’s experiences in India thus prepared him to reinvigorate the religious brotherhoods of the late Ottoman Empire and to do so in a way that emphasized strict Shari’a observance, a requirement that some other orders neglected but that Sirhindi demanded.

Only sixteen years passed between Halid’s return to Iraq (1811) and his death (1827), but this relatively brief span of time sufficed for him to produce
the greatest Islamic renewal of the last Ottoman century. The appeal of his new religious message attracted many followers but disrupted the status quo for the local amirs and Kadiri shaykhs. Their opposition forced Halid to relocate to Baghdad and later to Damascus. However, his expertise in the religious sciences also impressed the strict religious scholars, who disapproved of mystics neglectful of the Shari’a. Halid’s impact as both scholar and mystic won him acclaim, even from people who were not his followers, as the mujaddid of his century. For Halid, not only the organizational form of the Sufi brotherhood but also traditional techniques of oral teaching and manuscript production still proved effective in propagating his movement; the fact that he expressed himself in Arabic also facilitated the spread of his message among learned Muslims far and wide. He used these traditional techniques innovatively, reportedly sending out seventy khalifas who spread his teachings to Istanbul, where earlier waves of mujaddidi influence had prepared a receptive audience, and as far beyond as Chechnya and Java. He found many followers among merchants and landowners. Many of his followers were Kurds, and the patterns of Kurdish labor migration to Istanbul helped to broaden the base of his following there.

The Halidiye movement owed its success to many factors. Its founder was both a charismatic ascetic and a man of learning. Strict Shari’a observance helped win support from the ulema. At a time when Christian missionaries were already upsetting intercommunal relations, even in Kurdistan, and nationalism threatened the empire in Greece and Serbia, demands for strict Shari’a observance encouraged Muslims and positioned the movement as a force for Ottoman reintegration. The Naqshbandi principle of “solitude within society” (halvet der encümen) enjoined social and political engagement. In the late Ottoman Empire and modern Turkey, no religious movement has gained great influence without running into trouble with the authorities, and that was already true for Mevlana Halid. However, he overcame the suspicions of the Ottoman sultan of his time, Mahmud II (1808–39), by ordering his followers to pray for the state. Neither otherworldly like some other Sufi movements nor anti-Ottoman like the Wahhabis of Arabia, the Halidiye thus became a force for Ottoman revitalization and reintegration. The two later movements discussed below are not direct outgrowths of the Halidiye movement, but they emerged out of zones where it was the most dynamic, recent renewal movement. In that sense, both the Nur and the Gülen movements are at least indirectly indebted to the religious reinvigoration that Halid inspired.
A central element of the Halidiye movement’s appeal was its spiritual discipline. Like other Naqshbandis, Mevlana Halid’s followers performed their distinctive religious rites (dhikr in Arabic, zikir in Turkish) silently. To this, Halid added the practice of rabıta, the disciple’s meditative concentration on the mental image of his shaykh. Halid insisted that his followers concentrate on his image alone. This maintained the centralization of the order, at least until some later khalifas permitted their disciples to concentrate on their image, instead. Performing their dhikr not only silently but often alone or in small groups meant that the Halidis did not actually need dervish lodges (tekkes), although they might use them as meeting places. Eventually, the Halidis had more tekkes in Istanbul than any other order but—paradoxically—were better able to live without them after the tekkes were ordered closed in 1925. All considered, it is not surprising that the Halidiye achieved sometimes great influence under the empire. Naqshbandis benefited especially from the attack on the heterodox Bektaşis after the Janissaries were abolished in 1826.1

Factors like these enabled the Halidiye movement to figure for a century as the most important Islamic revival movement in the Ottoman cultural space. So much of the literature on the Halidis is in Arabic, and so much of the evidence about their history comes from the Arab provinces of the empire as well as from other Ottoman regions and lands outside the empire, that the significance of the movement is impossible to grasp without looking beyond the boundaries of today’s Turkey. After the collapse of the empire and the founding of the Turkish republic, the Halidiye movement faced new competition. But its growth and adaptation continued. Strict Shari’a observance, the silent dhikr which requires no meeting hall, and the principle of social and political engagement all helped the Halidis endure. During the 1920s and 1930s, the harshest phase of republican laicism, some Naqshbandis in the east took up arms against the Turkish republic. At the same time, others applied for jobs in the new Directorate of Religious Affairs, thus colonizing from within the laicist republic’s own agency for controlling religion. New forms of religious organization and cultural production emerged in the twentieth century, and these are most visible in the case of the new religious movements of that century. However, the Naqshbandis also branched out into new ventures in a similar range of ways, from mosque congregations to business ventures and print and electronic media. It is not surprising that the Turkish republic’s first openly religious prime minister, Turgut Özal (prime minister, 1983–89, and president, 1989–93), was a Naqshbandi. Recep
Tayyip Erdoğan (prime minister, 2003–14) also comes from a Naqshbandi background. The Justice and Development Party (in Turkish, Adalet ve Kalkınma, or AKP), which Erdoğan heads, won three successive general elections in 2002, 2007, and 2011 prior to his becoming Turkey’s first directly elected president in 2014.

**SAID NURSI AND THE NUR MOVEMENT**

The man who next created disruptive change in Turkish religious life, Said Nursi, lived a long life, from 1877 to 1960. Once again, this disruption occurred in a relatively short time span, in this case between 1925 and 1944, when Nursi wrote most of the vast number of treatises known collectively as the Risale-i Nur, for which he wished to be remembered. He, too, is sometimes mistakenly referred to as a Naqshbandi. However, the evidence indicates that he had read widely in the literature of both Sufism and formal religious studies but was neither the follower of an existing Sufi movement nor the creator of a new one. By 1925, when the Sufi brotherhoods were closed, not only laicists but also many religious people (in Turkey and in other Muslim countries) felt that the Sufi brotherhoods had outlived their usefulness and that it was time to move on. For practicing Muslims in Turkey, there was an even greater problem: how to find a place for themselves in a new political system that still recognized Muslim holidays and tacitly assumed that being a Muslim was a major marker of national identity, yet the policies and attitudes of the ruling elite equated all religion with the lowest forms of superstition. Under the circumstances, what people of faith needed was truly not a new brotherhood but a new kind of leader who could guide them toward spiritual fulfillment in the face of a regime that did not respect that quest. Just at the moment when the early republic’s top-down policies of laicism and populism were at their most aggressive, Nursi emerged to reassert God’s sovereignty. Not surprisingly, the official reception he got was by far the most hostile of any faced by religious leaders under discussion here.

Nursi’s life story is a fascinating one, combining human quirks and eccentricities with austere asceticism and inspired vision. Early on, he made an impression, both as a nonconformist and as an intellectual and spiritual prodigy, whence the epithet Bediüzzaman, “the wonder of the age.” Living through a profound personal crisis just as the empire collapsed and the
National Struggle occurred, he came to believe that Ahmad Sirhindi, who had earlier inspired Mevlana Halid, was transmitting to him a message to “unify your kible”—essentially, to face in only one direction to pray. To Nursi, this meant that his only source of inspiration must be the Qur’an. Spending much of his life in internal exile in western Turkey, far from his native region, he began writing religious treatises, which ultimately constituted the Risale-i Nur. People joined the movement by gathering to study the treatises, thus becoming talebe-i Nur, “students of light.” Nursi insisted that, in this case, the renewer (mujaddid) was not himself but his writings.

For purposes of brief discussion, two aspects of Nursi’s writings appear particularly significant. First, despite one prominent scholar’s opinion that the Risale-i Nur lacks overall cohesion, and although the treatises do move back and forth in the sense of connecting modern issues with Qur’anic interpretation, other scholars have found the collection to be unified. In a recent study, Serdar Poyraz has demonstrated conclusively that a clear organization governs the entire Risale. Starting with “The Words” (Sözler) as the foundations, texts grouped under specific titles, such as “The Flashes” (Lem’alar) and “The Rays” (Şualar), as well as all the other texts of the Risale, have programmatic relationships to “The Words” and to one another. The mere fact that “The Words,” “The Letters” (Mektubat), and “The Flashes” each contain thirty-three parts, which add up to ninety-nine, the number of the “most beautiful names” of God (esma-yı hüsna), demonstrates that the ten volumes of the Risale have a carefully planned structure.

The other especially significant aspect of the Risale pertains to its purposes and goals. Trials and investigations by the government attempted to determine whether Nursi was trying to found a new mystical order or undermine the republic. Talking past those charges, he demanded that European philosophers be brought to examine his works. They—or, at any rate, the European materialists from whom Turkish laicists had taken their inspiration—were Nursi’s target. Could European philosophers answer his refutation of them? For Nursi, there were three ways to acquire Islamic knowledge: the Qur’an, the Prophet, and “the Grand Book of the Universe,” a phrase from the mystical tradition. Within the universe, just as God “makes the sun and the moon attend to [their] duties,” the manifestations of His omnipotence also include “a magical emanation of true planning, administering, regulating, purifying and assigning duties.” Nursi wrote to prove that the Master of the Universe is the Master of Modernity.
In addition to arguing that materialist science could not undermine religious truth, Nursi’s movement embodied a new phase in the transformation of religious forms of organization and action. Nursi went far beyond merely abandoning the old organizational model of the religious brotherhood (tari-kat). He founded a text-based movement. During his lifetime, moreover, his movement accomplished the entire transition in the production of Islamic knowledge from oral to textual transmission and from manuscript to printed texts. Unwilling to abandon the script of the Qur’an, Nursi insisted until the early 1940s that his writings be reproduced only in the Arabic script. After 1928, this made it illegal to print them in Turkey. Copying manuscripts became increasingly the occupation of his followers; correcting manuscripts took up more and more of his time. Manuscript reproduction became a major force in perpetuating literacy in the Arabic script in Turkey, among women as well as men. If his followers’ claims that they produced 600,000 manuscripts are even remotely true, then one of the largest manuscript production projects in the history of the world occurred in the twentieth century. Finally, the argument that Latin-script texts would make his teachings more accessible to the young convinced him to allow some of his writings to be typed in Latin letters in the early 1940s; some texts were also reproduced photographically then. A 1956 court decision that the treatises did not violate the law finally led to the printing in Latin letters of the entire Risale. Increasing the number of readers into the hundreds of thousands, this started the process of moving the treatises into the mainstream of Turkish media.

FETHULLAH GÜLEN AND THE GÜLEN MOVEMENT

The death of a charismatic founder inevitably creates a crisis in the history of a religious movement. In contrast to the lack of a direct connection between the rise of the Halidiye and the Nur movements, a connection does exist between the Nur movement and Turkey’s third major religious revival. The Nur movement divided into several branches after Nursi’s death in 1960. Gradually, it became apparent that a young religious leader who was also a student of Nursi’s writings was going to become a new leader of exceptional impact. This was Fethullah Gülen (b. 1938). In the evolution of new forms of organization and action, beyond the Sufi brotherhood model that had worked for Mevlana Halid, the movement that Gülen inspired takes us again toward new horizons.
Known for his austere lifestyle, inspirational preaching, and profound knowledge of the Qur’an, the *Risale-i Nur*, and other subjects, Gülen has also written a great deal. Yet his movement is no longer text-based in the way that Nursi’s was. Known to his followers as Hocaefendi (roughly “teacher-master”), Gülen has defined yet another new model of leadership. Gülen is more interested in action than in writing. Increasingly, *hizmet* (service) is becoming the key term in the way its followers talk about the movement. As in the case of the Haliçîye and the Nur movements before it, the Gülen movement’s success reflects how well it corresponds to the challenges and opportunities of its times.

Like Halid and Nursi, Gülen made history in a relatively short time span. His movement expanded from local to national to global within twenty years after 1983. The new conditions created inside Turkey by Özal’s decade of national leadership (1983–93) and then the wider changes created by the Soviet collapse and the new era of globalization provided opportunities for the movement to grow. Gülen and his followers have responded to these opportunities in inspired ways. Still localized around İzmir in the 1970s, the movement started with Gülen’s mosque congregation, the local Qur’an school, the Nur movement’s reading groups (*dershane*), summer camps for male university students, and apartments (*ışık evleri*) that supporters made available to provide housing and a motivational environment for same-sex groups of university students.

After 1983, changes in the law on private foundations (*vakıf*) led many supporters to create new foundations, and the movement’s decentralization and lack of hierarchy facilitated a proliferation of initiatives, particularly in three fields: media, business, and education. In media, Gülen supporters bought the newspaper *Zaman* (Time) and made it into a large-circulation newspaper. They founded many print publications and expanded into electronic media with Samanyolu (Milky Way) TV and Burç (Tower or Zodiacal Constellation) FM radio. Out of these efforts, the Turkish Journalists and Writers Foundation (Türkiye Gazeteciler ve Yazarlar Vakfı, or GYV) also emerged to communicate between the movement and the outside world.

In the same period, leaders of Turkey’s major religious movements encouraged economic growth by persuading conservative families, who distrusted banks and used to keep money in gold, to put their wealth to economically productive uses. This kind of inspiration, coming from Gülen and other religious leaders, is largely responsible for the phenomenon of the “Anatolian tigers” (*Anadolu kaplanları*), the businesses and industries that have grown...
up mostly outside the geographical sites and sociocultural strata that had dominated industry and commerce in the earlier decades of the Turkish republic. This is the same propertied segment of provincial society that responded to Halid’s movement over a century earlier and then more recently to the Nur and the Gülen movements. In some cases, older businesses, like the Ülker chocolate and biscuit firm, identified with the Gülen movement, and many new firms, associations, and foundations also emerged in association with it.

What is most remarkable since the 1980s is both the speed and scale of the “take-off” in this sector of the Turkish economy as well as the growth in its members’ philanthropy. Among the new associations and foundations associated with the Gülen movement were the Turkish Teachers Foundation (Türkiye Öğretmenler Vakfı) and the Akyazılı Foundation for Secondary and Higher Education, which owned hundreds of dormitories for university students by the 1990s. “The Light” (Işık) Insurance Company was set up by movement supporters in 1995, as was the Asia Finance (Asya Finans) bank, which aimed to expand investment in the Central Asian republics. The movement also had its own business council, the Association for Solidarity in Business Life (İş Hayatı Dayanışma Derneği, or İŞHAD). Much of the expansion of Turkish enterprise into the Central Asian republics has been the work of movement supporters.

After 1983, it became possible to found private educational institutions. This quickly became the Gülen movement’s best-known endeavor. In addition to vast numbers of secondary schools, Gülen supporters founded Istanbul’s Fatih University in 1995, followed by universities in the capitals of all the Central Asian Turkic republics except Uzbekistan. By the early 2000s, Gülen supporters claimed over 1,000 schools in more than a hundred countries. The students of those schools are mostly male, but they include students of different religions and ethnicities, and there are also schools for girls.

The Hizmet movement schools in Kyrgyzstan provide a good illustration of what Gülen supporters have accomplished in general and in Central Asia in particular. Identified with the Sebat Foundation since their beginning in 1992, these schools have grown to the point that they are found in every province. As of 2011, the schools in Kyrgyzstan were educating nearly 8,500 students, selected out of more than 50,000 applicants each year. Many of the students received partial or, in some cases, full remission of school fees. The facilities were new and well-equipped with laboratories, computers, and smart blackboards. Pride among the graduates led many of those who succeeded in business to give back
by building gymnasiums or other additional facilities for their schools. Naming schools for national culture heroes added to the pride and consolidated links with the local society, as in the case of the Çıngız Aytmatov Boys High School in Bishkek, named after the great Kyrgyz novelist.

Gülen movement schools have been criticized for educating more boys than girls. As of 2011, this was certainly true in Kyrgyzstan. However, the Silk Road International School in Bishkek was a Hizmet school with a mixed student body, and most Kyrgyz provinces had at least one girls’ school. The Issıkgöl Girls’ High School, located in a former Soviet vacation colony with its own beach on Kyrgyzstan’s warm-water lake, was an impressive institution with an exceptional student body, which was also ethnically and religiously diverse. The demand for more girls’ schools was certainly strong. For example, the director of the boys’ high school in another province had to drive to Issıkgöl to visit his daughter, who was a boarding student there; then he had to drive back home and answer questions about when a girls’ high school would be opened in his province. Parents—even if neither one had a high school education—often wanted their daughters as well as their sons to attend the schools. A visiting scholar was certain to be asked to talk to the students and was bound to be impressed by their neat dress, respectful behavior, and mental sharpness. On any given day, the visitor might also be impressed with the contrast between the young people seen inside the school and those outside on the street. Inside, one saw mostly boys busily studying in white shirts and blue blazers, and outside were more girls going about in tight jeans and high heels. It seemed there was more than one way to be modern in Kyrgyzstan, and more for Hizmet movement supporters to do to contribute to this project. A visit to the Süleyman Demirel University in Almatı (Kazakstan) offered impressionistic evidence to me that the proportion of female students is higher in the universities founded by Gülen supporters.

By 2007, the Gülen movement claimed over six million members all around the world, and it was making itself known for its efforts to promote tolerance and interfaith dialogue everywhere. Working with members of the movement suggests that its greatest contribution may be in character formation and education. Both of these, and character formation especially, are traditional preoccupations of the Islamic mystical movements, which were the historical precursors of the Nursi and the Gülen movements. To any thoughtful observer of the Turkish scene in recent decades, the need for improved education is equally salient. Gülen has specifically articulated the goal of training a “Golden Generation” (altın nesil). The downside of this
approach has been to perpetuate the historical elitist bias of Turkish education. However, in countries where the state of the public schools is problematic, as in parts of post-Soviet Central Asia, visiting Hizmet schools and encountering their students makes it easy to understand why demand for the schools is so strong. Against the backdrop of Turkish educational history, what is new about Hizmet’s educational role is not so much its goal as the vastly enlarged possibilities created by the collapsing of old boundaries between peoples and religions in a world where the global and the local are present everywhere simultaneously.

Even so, as in the cases of Halid and Nursi before him, Gülen’s eminence as a religious leader made him a target of official attack and even indictment in Turkey. As a result, he has lived in North America since 1999. Absent from Turkey, he is present everywhere, thanks to the activity of his followers and the globalization of the electronic media. This engagement with global modernity provides the basis on which to appreciate the full measure of the Gülen movement’s significance.

**CONCLUSION**

During the past two centuries, three great renewals have transformed Ottoman and Turkish religious culture. A leader exceptional for his piety, learning, and vision launched each movement, achieving great impact within just a few decades. At some point, each leader ran into trouble with government authorities suspicious of change that challenged state control. These renewal movements won many followers largely because they responded particularly well to the challenges and opportunities that Muslims encountered at the time, whether it was in the 1820s, the 1920s, or the 1980s. In terms of their social organizations and their means for propagating their beliefs, the movements differ notably—yet their differences fit together, end to end, tracing a significant learning curve in religious history. For Halid, the model of the mystical brotherhood (*tarikat*) still worked as an organizational model. In his time, oral transmission and manuscript production still sufficed to convey the movement’s ideas and beliefs. In compensation, the fact that his movement originated in the Ottoman Arab lands and that he propagated his message in Arabic facilitated its spread to the wider Muslim world, something much harder to achieve for religious leaders who express themselves in Turkish.
A century younger, Nursi inhabited a world where not only laicists but also many religious Muslims thought it was time to leave the accumulated trappings of the mystical brotherhoods behind. Nursi offered his followers a religious shield against materialism, and he gave it to them in the form of a prodigious body of writings. Those writings became the basis of a text-based movement, which believers could join by studying and reproducing his works. Partly in reaction to the secularization of Ottoman print culture after 1908, Turkish-speaking Muslims now needed print media of their own. As noted, in his lifetime Nursi and his followers lived the entire transition from orality to textuality and from manuscript to print, and they did this with the huge amount of writing that he produced. Unlike Halid, who operated in the larger space of the late Ottoman Empire and whose writings in Arabic were understandable to learned Muslims everywhere, Nursi lived most of his life in the narrower space of the Turkish republic. As a Kurd dedicated to Turkish-Kurdish brotherhood within Islam, he wrote almost entirely in Turkish, aside from a few works in Arabic. As a result, the fact that he produced one of the twentieth century’s most important bodies of writing about Islam remained practically unknown outside Turkey for decades, even to experts on Islam.

Turkey’s third great renewal movement, the one inspired by Gülen, grew out of the Nur movement and also propagated its message originally in Turkish. However, the fact that the Gülen movement emerged more or less simultaneously with the rise of instantaneous electronic communications has enabled it to spread its message around the world with a speed and efficiency that Nursi could scarcely have imagined. The Gülen movement has explored many new frontiers of social organization and cultural production. It has created print and electronic media. It has set up foundations, businesses, and, especially, schools. It has set the example of how a Muslim religious movement can take advantage of contemporary means of networking to offer a constructive and productive engagement of Islam with global modernity.

Ultimately, the Gülen movement may prove as significant for the world of the twenty-first century as the Gandhi movement proved for the world of the twentieth century. In both cases, a movement launched within a particular faith has addressed its message of peace and fellowship to people of all faiths and has spread globally by emulation, without formal organization. Shaped by the struggle against imperialism and racism in British-ruled South Africa and India, the inspiration of the Gandhi movement spread to all the world, inspiring the civil rights movement in the United States and
the anti-nuclear, environmental, and human rights movements of Europe. Having spread around the world even more quickly and already become a part of the fabric of global modernity, the Gülen movement may contribute equally to the future of humankind.

NOTES

1. The Janissaries were the historical infantry corps of the Ottoman Empire, and the Bektashi order was a Sufi movement closely identified with them.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING