

## The Closure of Darulfunun and Initiatives for Transmitting Religious Values During the Gap Years in Religious Education

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### Abstract

This study examines the hiatus in higher religious education and the transmission of religious values in Turkey that began with the closure of Darülfünun's Faculty of Theology in 1933, situating this interruption within the broader processes of modernization and secularization. The central research question probes whether this institutional purge represented merely an ad hoc response to contemporaneous political exigencies or was instead a deliberately conceived component of a long-term secularization strategy. Employing qualitative methodologies, the investigation incorporates historical document analysis, extensive archival research, and a thorough review of contemporary periodicals. Republic-era archival records, official minutes, newspaper and journal archives, as well as relevant biographical works, were meticulously scrutinized. In addition, sociological and institutional analysis techniques were applied to assess the reform process's reception in society and the dynamics of acceptance and resistance among various social actors. The focal point of the study includes the institutional initiatives of the Presidency of Religious Affairs alongside the activities of prominent figures whose influence endures to the present day: Said Nursi (1877–1960), Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan (1888–1959), and Necip Fazıl Kısakürek (1904–1983). The research systematically elucidates how, despite the stringent restrictions imposed by the single-party regime, traditional religious instruction persisted and evolved through semi-official and unofficial channels. Findings indicate that, notwithstanding the state's comprehensive secular reforms which significantly curtailed formal religious education, grassroots dynamics enabled the continuation of unofficial religious teaching. Social networks spearheaded by Said Nursi, Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan, and Necip Fazıl Kısakürek played a decisive role in fostering resilience and sustaining traditional religious values and pedagogical practices. This societal resilience emerged as a critical factor in the reestablishment of formal religious educational institutions in the late 1940s. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that the interplay between top-down secularization policies and bottom-up religious demands has produced a dynamic and

intricate equilibrium that underpins contemporary understandings of religion in Turkey.

**Keywords:** Religious Education, Dârülfünun Faculty of Theology, Modernization and Secularization, Gap Years in Religious Education, Said Nursi, Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan, Tevhid-i Tedrisat Law.

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## Dârülfünun'un Kapatılması ve Din Eğitimindeki Boşluk Yıllarında Dini Değerlerin Aktarılmasına Yönelik Girişimler

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### Öz

Bu çalışma, 1933 yılında Darülfünun İlahiyat Fakültesi'nin kapatılmasıyla başlayan ve Türkiye'de yüksek din eğitimi ile dini değerlerin aktarımında görülen boşluk yıllarını modernleşme ve sekülerleşme süreçleri çerçevesinde ele almaktadır. Araştırmanın temel sorusu, bu kurumsal tasfiye girişiminin yalnızca dönemin siyasi ihtiyaçlarına yönelik ani bir tepki mi yoksa uzun vadeli bir sekülerleşme stratejisinin parçası olarak bilinçli şekilde mi planlandığıdır. Araştırma, nitel yöntemler kullanılarak gerçekleştirilmiş olup, tarihsel belge analizi, arşiv incelemeleri ve dönemin süreli yayınlarının kapsamlı bir incelemesini içermektedir. Cumhuriyet dönemi arşiv belgeleri, resmi tutanaklar, gazete ve dergi arşivleri ile döneme ilişkin biyografik çalışmalar titizlikle analiz edilmiştir. Bunun yanı sıra sosyolojik ve kurumsal analiz teknikleriyle reform sürecinin toplum nezdindeki kabul ve direnç dinamikleri incelenmiştir. Çalışmanın odağında, Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı'nın kurumsal girişimlerinin yanı sıra, Said Nursi (1877-1960), Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan (1888-1959) ve Necip Fazıl Kısakürek (1904-1983) gibi dönemin önemli şahsiyetlerinin faaliyetleri yer almaktadır. Araştırma, tek parti rejiminin katı kısıtlamalarına rağmen, geleneksel din eğitiminin yarı resmi ve gayriresmi mecralar aracılığıyla nasıl korunduğunu ve dönüştüğünü sistematik bir şekilde ortaya koymaktadır. Elde edilen bulgular, devletin uyguladığı kapsamlı seküler reformlara karşın, toplumun alt katmanlarından yükselen dinamiklerin gayriresmi din eğitimi devam ettirmesini mümkün kıldığını göstermektedir. Özellikle Said Nursi, Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan ve Necip Fazıl Kısakürek'in öncülük ettiği sosyal ağlar, geleneksel dini değerler ve eğitim pratiklerinin direnç kazanarak süreklilik kazanmasında kritik rol oynamıştır. Bu toplumsal direnç, 1940'lı yılların sonunda resmi din eğitimi kurumlarının yeniden kuruluş sürecinde belirleyici bir unsur olarak öne çıkmıştır. Sonuç itibarıyla çalışma, yukarıdan aşağıya uygulanan sekülerleşme politikaları ile aşağıdan yukarıya yükselen dini taleplerin etkileşiminin, Türkiye'nin günümüzdeki din anlayışını şekillendiren dinamik ve

karmaşık bir denge oluşturduğunu ortaya koymaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Din Eğitimi, Dârülfünun İlahiyat Fakültesi, Modernleşme ve Sekülerleşme, Din Eğitimindeki Boşluk Yılları, Said Nursi ve Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan, Tevhid-i Tedrisat Kanunu.

### Atıf Bilgisi

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## Introduction

This article investigates recent transformations in Turkey's religious education and theology, focusing on the intellectual and institutional shifts as well as their social ramifications. It addresses a notable gap in the literature by examining the historical and theoretical aspects of the hiatus in "higher religious education" that followed the closure of the Darulfunun Faculty of Theology (1924–1933) during the early Republican period. This era, marked by a radical redefinition of religious education policies and institutional structures, holds considerable importance for both theoretical inquiry and practical reform.

The research situates the evolution of religious education within a comprehensive theoretical framework that links modernization processes to broader social change. It traces the continuity of theological faculties from the late Ottoman period to the early Republic, assessing how institutional memory and social dynamics intersected with the legacies of the madrasa tradition and the emerging modern university model. By analyzing these dual influences, the study offers an integrated perspective on how modernization, secularization, and institutional transformation interact in the field of religious education. In doing so, it offers concrete recommendations for restructuring higher religious education in Turkey based on historical experiences.

The main argument contends that the closure of the Darulfunun Faculty of Theology was not simply a short-term political reaction; rather, it marked a critical turning point in the radical implementation of secularization policies. The article examines how religious education persisted during the 'interruption' years as an "interim" or "gap" period during the 1930s and 1940s, exploring the various actors and channels that filled the void left by official institutions. The educational void precipitated by the closure of madrasas—intensified by the establishment of replacement Imam Hatip schools, the dissolution of theology faculties, and the removal of religious instruction from state curricula—was effectively addressed through informal study circles, tutorial groups, publishing initiatives, and social networks led by figures such as Said Nursi, Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan, and Necip Fazıl Kısakürek. This grassroots resilience subsequently became the driving force behind the restructuring of formal religious education institutions from 1949 onward.

By engaging with the debates and practices of that era, the study reveals the new forms that religious education assumed in Turkey and discusses the long-term implications of these developments.

Methodologically, the study marries historical document analysis and a comprehensive review of the relevant scholarship with qualitative research methods. It subjects archival materials, legislative texts, parliamentary debates, and contemporary newspaper and journal publications—as well as the influential writings of the era's key intellectuals—to rigorous scrutiny. Moreover, sociological and institutional analysis techniques are

deployed to illuminate the context and rationale behind the reform initiatives and to explore the diverse reactions of different social groups to these transformations.

How does this article—by offering a holistic analysis of the transformation of higher religious education in Turkey—contribute both theoretically and practically to the field of religious studies, in what ways do the radical changes in state policy reflect an ongoing search for a new equilibrium between the secular principles of the modern state and the country's enduring religious heritage, and how does revisiting this critical period within its historical and sociological contexts establish a unique position in the academic literature while laying the groundwork for future interdisciplinary research?

### 1. Darülfünun: From Early Theological Scholarship and Higher Education Foundations to Secular Overhaul and Dissolution

Beginning in the mid-19th century, the Ottoman Empire initiated a transformation of its higher education system, spurred by increasing scientific exchanges with the West and evolving pedagogical philosophies. Alongside the traditional madrasas of the Tanzimat period, the state founded “Daru’l-Funun” (House of Sciences), an institution deliberately separated from religious schools and dedicated to offering a broad modern curriculum beyond purely theological subjects.<sup>1</sup>

Between 1846 and 1900, Daru’l-Funun underwent several cycles of establishment and dissolution under various names, initially operating without a dedicated theology department. In 1900, under Abdülhamid II, “Daru’l-Funun-i Şahane” received official sanction to establish the “*Ulum-ı Aliye-i Diniyye*” (Higher Religious Sciences), regarded as a precursor to modern theological faculties; from 1913 onward, it became known as “İstanbul Daru’l-Funun.” However, the “*Ulum-ı Şeriyye*” (Sharia Sciences) program was discontinued in 1914, coinciding with the creation of “*Medresetü’l-Mütehassisin*,” (School of Specialists) which continued advanced religious instruction until March 3, 1924, later renamed “*Süleymaniye Medresesi*” (Süleymaniye-Madrasa) in 1918. Despite curricular changes, elements of the “*Ulum-ı Şeriyye*” persisted within Daru’l-Funun until the closure of Süleymaniye Madrasa—operating under the Sheikhlülislam—in accordance with Article 2 of the 1924 Tevhid-i Tedrisat Law (Law on the Unification of Education).<sup>2</sup> This evolving

<sup>1</sup> Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, “Dârülfünun,” *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: TDV Yayınları, 1993), 8/521; M. Andreas Kazamias, *Education and the quest for modernity in Turkey* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966), 56-114.

<sup>2</sup> İhsanoğlu, “Dârülfünun,” 8/521-524; Halis Ayhan, “İlâhiyat Fakültesi,” *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: TDV Yayınları, 2000), 22/255-257; Ali Arslan-Mustafa Selçuk, “Üniversite ve Özerklik: Tek Parti Döneminde Yüksek Öğretim (1923-1946),” *Türkiye Araştırmaları Literatür Dergisi*, Cilt 6, Sayı 12, 2008, 350-352, Please refer to the Law, Law on the Unification of Education (*Tevhid-i Tedrisat Kanunu*), Law No. 430, Date of Adoption: March 3, 1924

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Article 1

All scientific and educational institutions within the borders of Turkey shall be affiliated with the Ministry of Education (Maarif Vekâleti).

institutional landscape reflects the broader struggle to balance the preservation of traditional religious knowledge with the demands of modernization and secularization—a tension that continued to shape Turkish educational policies well into the Republican era.

Under Article 4 of the Tevhid-i-Tedrisat Law, the Ministry of Education was mandated to establish a Faculty of Theology at Daru'l-Funun to train highly qualified religious scholars. Consequently, in May 1924 a three-year degree program in religious studies—officially designated as the “Faculty of Theology”—was launched with an initial enrollment of 284 students.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, on April 21, 1924, Law No. 493 was enacted, allowing Istanbul Daru'l-Funun to form a “Theological Madrasa”.<sup>4</sup> This law, under Article 1, granted the institution extensive academic, administrative, and financial autonomy, though academic disciplines such as medicine, literature, theology, and natural sciences were still classified as “madrasa” until the Daru'l-Funun Ordinance of October 7, 1925, formally updated the terminology to “faculty”.<sup>5</sup> Notably, while Article 3 of Law No. 493 permitted doctoral studies in Law, Literature, and Natural Sciences, it made no such provision for theology graduates.<sup>6</sup>

A distinctive aspect of the Faculty of Theology's curriculum was its deliberate

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*Article 2*

All madrasas, schools, and similar institutions previously administered by the Ministry of Sharia and Foundations (*Şer'iyye ve Evkaf Vekâleti*) or by private foundations shall be transferred to the Ministry of Education. The funds allocated in the budget of the Ministry of Sharia and Foundations for said schools and madrasas shall likewise be transferred to the Ministry of Education.

*Article 3*

The Ministry of Education is obliged to establish schools for training those who will perform religious services such as imamate, preaching, the call to prayer, or caretaking of places of worship. These schools shall be administered under the condition that they remain connected to, and supervised by, the Ministry of Education. In addition to the requisite religious knowledge for such services, courses in the sciences, arts, and culture shall also be provided.

*Article 4*

From the date of promulgation of this Law, no private schools or madrasas may be established. Those already in existence may either continue operating under conditions approved by the Ministry of Education or be closed.

*Article 5*

The Ministry of Education shall prepare curricula for educational and instructional institutions, and regulate the opening, closing, and administration of schools. Whether religious or scientific in nature, all branches of knowledge shall be taught under the supervision and control of the State.

*Article 6*

This Law shall enter into force as of the date of its publication.

*Article 7*

The enforcement of the provisions of this Law is entrusted to the Government of the Grand National Assembly.

<sup>3</sup> Ali Arslan, *Darul-fünundan Üniversiteye* (İstanbul: Kitabevi Yayınları, 1995), 86, 110.

<sup>4</sup> At the initiative of Hafız İbrahim Efendi, a parliamentary representative from Isparta affiliated with the Faculty of Theology, Istanbul Darü'l-Fünun was formally recognized as an independent department, See also, TBMMTD (Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Tutanak Dergisi), 21.4.1924, D. 2, C. VIII, B. 43, 1104.

<sup>5</sup> TBMMTD, 5.3.1925, D. 2, C. XV, B. 70, 161, 183, 212-213; RG (Resmi Gazete), 24.5.1924, K. 493, S. 71, 10-11.

<sup>6</sup> RG, 6. 9. 1924, S. 75, 1.

separation of the study of Tafsîr (Qur'anic exegesis) and its historical interpretative evolution from that of Ḥadîṭ and its transmission history. Although the historical dimensions of Islamic jurisprudence (Fiqh) were included, the practical study of Fiqh was intentionally excluded, reflecting contemporary legal modernization reforms. In a 1925 parliamentary address, Mustafa Kemal Pasha stressed the need for fundamental laws to meet modern standards,<sup>7</sup> thereby justifying the exclusion of Fiqh with only minor adjustments to its structure. As a result, the Faculty of Theology retained its original orientation<sup>8</sup>—a cornerstone of the Ottoman legal system—within the new educational framework. The Faculty maintained its original organizational model, with only minor adjustments, until its eventual closure in 1933.<sup>9</sup>

Innovative elements introduced by the Faculty aligned with a modern university model tailored for contemporary theological education. Modernization-minded scholars used these parameters to articulate the concept of "modern Islam" and, in response to conservative opposition, produced detailed reports advocating for sweeping reforms in Islamic practice.<sup>10</sup> When Daru'l-Funun was reconstituted as Istanbul University, nearly all of its theological faculty were incorporated into the new institution, save for one professor.<sup>11</sup>

The Faculty also made notable scholarly contributions through its publications. Between 1925 and 1933, it released 25 issues of the Daru'l-Funun Faculty of Theology Journal. The first ten issues were printed in Arabic script, and following the 1928 script reform, the subsequent fifteen appeared in Latin script. The journal maintained an objective, factual focus, emphasizing scientific, historical, social, and philosophical analyses of religion, while devoting only marginal attention to traditional Islamic disciplines such as Tafsîr, Ḥadîṭ, and Fiqh.<sup>12</sup>

Despite these reforms, the Faculty of Theology was often criticized as merely an extension of the traditional madrasa system, leading to lower-than-expected public interest.<sup>13</sup> Factors such as the removal of religious instruction in primary and secondary schools, the disruptive impact of the script reform, personnel shortages in the Directorate of Religious Affairs, limited employment opportunities for graduates, and restrictions on Imam Hatip school graduates (who held only secondary diplomas) contributed to a steady decline in enrollment. Numbers fell from 284 students in 1924/1925 to just 20 in 1932/1933,

<sup>7</sup> TBMMTD, 1.11.1925, D. 2, C. XIX, B. 1, 10.

<sup>8</sup> Binnaz Toprak, *Islam and Political Development in Turkey, Social, Economic and Political Studies of the Middle East* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981), 52-53.

<sup>9</sup> Halis Ayhan, *Türkiyede Din Eğitimi* (İstanbul: İFAV, 1999), 67.

<sup>10</sup> Dücan Cündioğlu, *Türkçe Kuran ve Cumhuriyet İdeolojisi* (İstanbul: Kitabevi, 1998), 60-61.

<sup>11</sup> Arslan, *Darul-fünundan Üniversiteye*, 352.

<sup>12</sup> Gotthard Jäschke, *Der Islam in der neuen Türkei* (Leiden: Die Welt des Islams, Volume I., 1951), 132-133; Hamit Er, "Dârülfünun İlahiyat Fakültesi Mecmuası," *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: TDV Yayınları, 1993), 8/526-527.

<sup>13</sup> Arslan, *Darul-fünundan Üniversiteye*, 194-196, 203-208.



after which no new students were admitted.<sup>14</sup>

Amid these changes, criticism of Daru'l-Funun escalated. Government officials and certain Kemalist circles accused it of failing to embrace necessary reforms, provide sufficient institutional support, and perform adequately in research.<sup>15</sup> An unsatisfactory report by Daru'l-Funun led the government in 1930 to commission Albert Malche, a Geneva-based pedagogy professor, to propose a reorganization.<sup>16</sup> Following Malche's report, rumors of closure spread, and despite initial denials by Education Minister M. Reşid Galib (1893–1934), the government decided on May 5, 1933, to dissolve Daru'l-Funun and replace it with the University of Istanbul. On May 31, 1933, Parliament approved the closure of all affiliated institutions and directed the Ministry of Education to inaugurate the new university on August 1, 1933.<sup>17</sup> On September 12, 1933, Minister Galib announced that “knowledge now takes precedence over idealism.” He attributed Darülfünun's closure to its “indifference toward crucial political and societal reforms” and underscored that the University of Istanbul would be established on “nationalistic and revolutionary principles.”<sup>18</sup>

Rather than retaining the dissolved Faculty of Theology, Malche's report proposed the establishment of an Islam Research Institute (İslam Tetkikleri Enstitüsü) under the Faculty of Language Sciences, within the organizational framework of the Oriental Institute (Şarkiyat Enstitüsü). Intended solely for research, the institute's faculty were reassigned or retired, and due to extremely low enrollment, it ceased operations after 1936 and was closed in 1941.<sup>19</sup>

Until 1933, the Faculty of Theology faced substantial criticism, with detractors arguing that it merely perpetuated the legacy of traditional madrasas, institutions that often resisted modernization. This perception was a key factor in excluding the Faculty of Theology from the newly established University of Istanbul, marking the end of state-supervised religious education under the Ministry of Education.<sup>20</sup> Conservative groups, who viewed the closure as a significant loss in formal religious education, voiced strong

<sup>14</sup> İsmet Parmaksızoğlu, *Türkiye'de Din Eğitimi* (İstanbul: Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 1966), 25; Toprak, *Islam and Political Development in Turkey, Social, Economic and Political Studies of the Middle East*, 49; Arslan, *Darul-fünundan Üniversiteye*, 489–490.

<sup>15</sup> Arslan, *Darul-fünundan Üniversiteye*, 193–221, 241–262.

<sup>16</sup> TBMMTD, 22.7.1931, D. 4, C. III, B. 34, 195; 17.5.1933, D. 4, C. XV, B. 52, 140–145; Arslan, *Darul-fünundan Üniversiteye*, 289–314.

<sup>17</sup> RG, 6. 6.1933, K. 2252, S. 2420, 2635–2636; See for parliamentary discussions, TBMMTD, 31.5.1933, D. 4, C. XV, B. 64, 465–467.

<sup>18</sup> “The Institution's Indifference to Major Political and Social Reforms”, “Istanbul University's most fundamental characteristic will be its nationalistic and revolutionary orientation”, Arslan, *Darul-fünundan Üniversiteye*, 327–356; İhsanoğlu, “Dârülfünun,” 8/525.

<sup>19</sup> TBMMTD, 3.1.1949, D. 8, C. XV, B. 26, 10; Jäschke, *Der Islam in der neuen Türkei*, 122; Parmaksızoğlu, *Türkiye'de Din Eğitimi*, 25; Toprak, *Islam and Political Development in Turkey, Social, Economic and Political Studies of the Middle East*, 49.

<sup>20</sup> M. Şevki Aydın, *Cumhuriyet Döneminde Din Eğitimi Öğretmeni Yetiştirme ve İstihdamı* (İstanbul: DEM, 2005), 76.

objections; however, their efforts to reverse the decision proved unsuccessful. This episode underscores both the radical nature of early Republican modernization efforts and the enduring tensions between traditional religious practices and the drive for secular, state-controlled education.<sup>21</sup>

During the early Republican period, Turkey's religious education underwent dramatic transformation as the traditional madrasa system was dismantled and replaced by a state-controlled, vocational model—illustrated by the establishment of the Faculty of Theology at Daru'l-Funun. Despite innovative efforts to modernize theological teaching, these reforms eventually restricted the diversity of Islamic scholarship, leading to the closure of many long-standing traditional institutions and sparking ongoing debates over how to balance secular modernity with religious heritage.

## **2. State Reforms and the Transformation of Religious Education in Early Republican Turkey**

Following the establishment of the Republic, its founders launched comprehensive reforms to build a secular society within a new state framework. Central to these reforms was the Tevhid-i Tedrisat Law, which reformed the educational system by incorporating secular and national values into the curriculum. As a result, all traditional madrasas were shuttered, and new institutions—such as İmam Hatip Schools and a newly established Faculty of Theology—were created to train religious personnel in accordance with the Republic's modernization goals.

Beyond these structural changes, the state further standardized religious education. The closure of madrasas marked a decisive break with the past, and over time, the historically diverse methods of religious instruction were replaced by a more uniform, state-sanctioned model. Throughout the 25-year single-party period, strict secular policies gradually led to the shutdown of many new religious institutions, ushering in what is often referred to as the “era without state religious education.”

However, by the late 1940s, as the single-party regime's influence waned and political reforms gained traction, the demand for religious education experienced a revival. In response, the state reintroduced religious instruction through modernized channels, offering limited official programs alongside various organized and informal initiatives. This dual approach ensured that traditional religious perspectives continued to impact both individual lives and the broader societal framework.

Overall, the evolution of religious education during this period illustrates a complex balancing act: the state's efforts to forge a secular, national identity were continually challenged by the deep-rooted influence of traditional religious values in Turkish society.

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<sup>21</sup> Parmaksızoğlu, *Türkiye'de Din Eğitimi*, 26; Aydın, *Cumhuriyet Döneminde Din Eğitimi Öğretmeni Yetiştirme ve İstihdamı*, 75-82; Ayhan, *Türkiyede Din Eğitimi*, 76-77.

## 2.1. State Reforms and Institutional Activities: Transforming Religious Education

During the early years of the Republic, radical secularization policies created significant gaps in religious education, prompting the state to restructure traditional religious institutions to ensure the continued transmission of Islamic knowledge. To achieve this, the Presidency of Religious Affairs<sup>22</sup> was established on March 3, 1924, as the successor to the Ottoman-era *Şer'iyye ve Evkaf Vekâleti*. Although this institution inherited a legacy of traditional Islamic oversight, its authority was deliberately curtailed under the new regime, reducing the prestige of the 'Ulamâ' and confining them to routine bureaucratic roles. These measures were part of a broader strategy to consolidate state control over religious matters and narrow the scope of religious education.<sup>23</sup>

A critical turning point in this transformation was the closure of the Darulfunun Faculty of Theology—a former center for advanced Islamic studies and a symbol of Ottoman scholarly heritage. Its shutdown not only marked a break with a long-standing tradition of theological education but also widened the gap that the state attempted to fill with more controlled, vocational approaches. In response, the state introduced Qur'anic courses during the so-called "time without state religious education" to instill traditional religious values in children and adolescents.<sup>24</sup> The discontinuation of the Ottoman-era Daru'l-Kurra tradition under the Tevhid-i Tedrisat Law further deepened this gap, which the state addressed by launching new memorization programs for Hâfız candidates.<sup>25</sup> Initiated by Mehmet Rifat Börekçi in 1925 as vocational schools under the Presidency's jurisdiction,<sup>26</sup> these courses were temporarily suspended due to the 1929 script reform<sup>27</sup>—replacing Arabic with the Latin alphabet—but were reopened in 1930 under strict supervision.<sup>28</sup>

Despite numerous challenges, these Qur'anic courses eventually gained official recognition. Their numbers grew remarkably—from only nine programs in 1930 to between 50 and 60 by 1940, and ultimately exceeding 100 institutions by the end of the single-party era—with enrollment reaching several thousand. This growth vividly illustrates the

<sup>22</sup> Article 136 of the 1982 Constitution, which regulates the Presidency of Religious Affairs, states as follows: "The Presidency of Religious Affairs, as part of the general administration, shall perform its duties prescribed by a specific law in accordance with the principle of secularism, outside all political views and opinions, and aimed at national solidarity and unity", <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/anayasa/anayasa82.htm>

<sup>23</sup> TBMMTD, 3.3.1924, D. 2, C. VII, B. 2, 21-24.; RG, 6. 3. 1924, K. 429, S. 63, 6.; İştâar Gözaydın, "Diyanet and Politics," *The Muslim World, Volume (98)* 2-3, (2008), 220.; Gözaydın, "Diyanet and Politics," 218.

<sup>24</sup> Jäschke, *Der Islam in der neuen Türkei*, 122; Howard A. Reed, "Turkey's New Imam-Hatip Schools," *Die Welt des Islams Volume IV* Leiden 1951, 151-152.

<sup>25</sup> TBMMTD, 2.4.1925, D. 2, C. XVII, B. 92, 60-61; Cahit Baltacı, "Cumhuriyet Döneminde Kur'an Kursları," *DEAD (6)* İstanbul 1999, 183; Hasan Yavuzer, *Çağdaş Din Hizmeti ve Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı-Dini, Otorite ve Teşkilatların Sosyolojik Analizi-* (Laçın Yayınları, Kayseri 2006), 152.

<sup>26</sup> Jäschke, *Der Islam in der neuen Türkei*, 122.

<sup>27</sup> TBMMTD, 1.11.1928, D. 3, C. V, B. 1, 7-11.; RG, 3. 11. 1928, K. 1353, S. 1030, 6001-6003.

<sup>28</sup> Jäschke, *Der Islam in der neuen Türkei*, 123; Hasan Hüseyin Ceylan, *Cumhuriyet Dönemi Din-Devlet İlişkileri* (Risale Yayınları, İstanbul 1990), 264.; Yavuzer, *Çağdaş Din Hizmeti ve Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*, 152-154.

enduring strength of traditional religious convictions amid extensive secular reforms.<sup>29</sup>

In parallel, Friday sermons and Mufti offices were central to the state's strategy for reconstituting religious consciousness among conservative segments of society. Friday sermons were restructured as public platforms for disseminating religious values and reinforcing community and moral discipline. Traditionally delivered in Arabic, these sermons were transformed to be delivered in Turkish<sup>30</sup> —a shift advocated by state authorities, including Mustafa Kemal Pasha—to enhance accessibility following early Republic language reforms. This change led to the creation of standardized Turkish-language model sermons and the mandatory translation of Arabic Qur'anic passages and Hadith, which broadened the reach of religious discourse while limiting it to state-approved narratives.<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, the establishment and regulation of Mufti offices formed another key element of the state's intervention. These offices, overseeing religious affairs at both urban and rural levels, operated as extensions of central authority by enforcing strict adherence to state-sanctioned interpretations of religious texts. Under the 1927 budget law, 391 Mufti offices were established within the Taşra system—rising to 401 by 1929 and, by early 1939, reaching 63 urban and 351 rural offices. Although this extensive network was designed to disseminate a uniform religious message nationwide, prevailing social norms and gender-specific expectations limited access primarily to men, thereby reinforcing traditional social hierarchies and excluding women and children from public religious instruction.<sup>32</sup>

The early Republican restructuring of religious education in Turkey was a deliberate strategy to integrate traditional Islamic instruction into a new secular framework. By establishing the Presidency of Religious Affairs and closing key institutions such as the Darülfünun Faculty of Theology, the state shifted from comprehensive theological scholarship to a more controlled, vocational model, exemplified by the expansion of Qur'anic courses. This change was intended to standardize the transmission of religious knowledge while replacing the historically diverse practices of Islamic education with a system that could be closely monitored and regulated. Reforms also included modifying Friday sermons—transitioning them from Arabic to Turkish—and imposing strict oversight on Mufti offices. These measures consolidated state control over religious expression, promoting a uniform narrative at the cost of diminishing interpretive diversity. Furthermore, these changes restricted access to religious education, particularly for women and children, thereby reinforcing existing social hierarchies. Overall, these reforms highlight the inherent tension between modern secular governance and traditional Islamic

<sup>29</sup> Mehmet Ali Gökaçtı, *Türkiye'de Din Eğitimi ve İmam Hatipler* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2005), 149-150.

<sup>30</sup> Zeki Salih Zengin, "Osmanlı Döneminde Yaygın Din Eğitimi Faaliyeti Olarak Hutbeler," *Çukurova Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi* (17)1 2008, 386-389.

<sup>31</sup> Yavuzer, *Çağdaş Din Hizmeti ve Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*, 140.

<sup>32</sup> Jäschke, *Der Islam in der neuen Türkei*, 72-74; Cündioğlu, *Türkçe Kuran ve Cumhuriyet İdeolojisi*, 32-81.; Fahri Kayadibi, "Cumhuriyet Dönemi İmam-Hatiplik-Vaizlik," *DEAD* (6) İstanbul 1999, 160, 164.

scholarship. While the state's policies successfully aligned religious education with nationalistic and secular ideals, they inadvertently reduced the diversity and depth of Islamic intellectual traditions—a legacy that continues to influence contemporary debates on the role of religion in Turkish society.<sup>33</sup>

The early Republican era transformed religious education by replacing the diverse, traditional methods of theological instruction with a centralized, vocational approach. Measures such as the creation of the Presidency of Religious Affairs, the closure of historic institutions, and the standardization of Friday sermons and Mufti offices solidified the state's control over religious expression. However, this uniform approach reduced the rich diversity and depth of Islamic intellectual traditions—a legacy that still fuels debates about the place of religion in contemporary Turkish society.

## **2.2. A Conservative Counter to State Secularization: Grassroots Religious Initiatives**

Amid state policies designed to undermine traditional religious beliefs, conservative groups became increasingly anxious that their longstanding worldview and the institutions that embodied it might vanish or fail to be transmitted to future generations. Although many accepted that traditional religious influence would diminish compared to its Ottoman-era prominence, there remained an urgent imperative to safeguard and perpetuate these traditions. In response, diverse religious factions emerged—often operating with relative autonomy and even clandestinely—to continue disseminating traditional ideas via organized and individual initiatives, including affiliated publications. These groups endured continuous state surveillance, legal challenges, and pressure, with many members facing convictions.<sup>34</sup> These movements can be grouped into four main categories. First, the Islamic Modernists, often referred to as the Nurcu Movement and led by Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, promoted a synthesis of science and religion that bridged traditional values with modern scientific progress. Second, there is the Süleymancılık movement, exemplified by the Süleymancı community under Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan, which combined the classical madrasa education with dervish mysticism to preserve and reinterpret traditional teachings for today's society. Third, the Ottoman İlmiye Corps, composed of individuals steeped in traditional madrasa learning and connected to various religious orders, pursued localized efforts to spread religious knowledge without centralized coordination. Lastly, there was a revival of religious publications and print culture, marked by influential texts and journals that played a critical role in shaping

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<sup>33</sup> İsmail Kara, “Cumhuriyet Türkiye’sinde Dinî Yayıncılığın Gelişimi Üzerine Birkaç Not”, *Toplum ve Bilim* 29/30 İstanbul 1985, 154.; Necdet Subaşı, *Ara Dönem Din Politikaları* (İstanbul: Küre Yayınları, 2005), 61; Before the establishment of the Presidency of Religious Affairs, the *Şer’iyye ve Evkaf Vekâleti* had published 10 books. These publications are regarded as highly significant in reflecting the sensitivities of the transitional period (1920–1924). Subsequently, after the founding of the Presidency of Religious Affairs, only 30 books were published by the institution between 1924 and 1950, with a total circulation of 352,000 copies, Kara, “Cumhuriyet Türkiye’sinde Dinî Yayıncılığın Gelişimi”, 159.

<sup>34</sup> Gökaçtı, *Türkiye’de Din Eğitimi ve İmam Hatipler*, 164; Subaşı, *Ara Dönem Din Politikaları*, 59–67.

modern Islamic thought.

### 2.2.1. The Figure of Said Nursi and His Transformative Impact

Throughout the process of modernization, traditional religious perspectives sought to broaden their influence by aligning aspects of their teachings with modern values. In response, Kemalist elites implemented laws and policies to marginalize these views or confine them to the private sphere, ensuring that the once-integral religious narratives of the Ottoman state would not re-emerge as a dominant public force. Despite these measures curbing official religious influence, an unofficial revival of traditional thought began from the late 1940s, with Bediüzzaman Said Nursi emerging as the foremost figure.<sup>35</sup>

Said Nursi, active during the political turmoil of the late Ottoman period and occasionally connected with groups such as the Committee of Union and Progress, was implicated in events like the 31 March Incident (1909) and the Sheikh Said Rebellion (1925).<sup>36</sup> Consequently, Kemalist elites branded him a "living symbol of religious reactionism",<sup>37</sup> subjecting him to persistent state persecution. Although he supported the War of Independence and was even invited to Ankara by Mustafa Kemal Pasha,<sup>38</sup> Nursi grew disillusioned with the political climate, coming to believe that genuine Islamic progress could not be achieved through political means. This realization led him to divide his life into two distinct phases—the "Old Said" (before 1926) and the "New Said" (after 1926).<sup>39</sup> In the latter period, he concentrated on preserving Islam—especially within the traditional Sunni framework<sup>40</sup>—amid the early Republic's challenges, aiming to secure its continuity for future generations.<sup>41</sup>

A significant challenge during this era was the scarcity of accessible religious knowledge in contrast to rapid global advancements.<sup>42</sup> Convinced that there was room for harmony between Islam and science, Nursi adopted an innovative approach by using religious texts and symbols to present scientific ideas. Although he never developed a fully systematic theory, his work is noted for incorporating Sufi elements into his teachings. His

<sup>35</sup> He was born in the village of Nurs, in the Hizan district of Bitlis province, in 1878. Said Nursi, of Kurdish origin, witnessed significant historical events during his long life, including the Second Constitutional Era (II. Meşrutiyet), the occupation of Turkey, the War of Independence, and both the single-party and multi-party periods. Nursi was educated under the influence of the Naqshbandi order, which was widespread among the Kurds. After 1925, he compiled his advanced Islamic interpretations into the Külliyyât (collected works), widely known as the Risale-i Nur. Numerous communities emerged around these Risales under the umbrella of Nurculuk. Nursi passed away in 1960 in Urfa, Alparslan Açıkgenç, "Said Nursi", *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (Ankara: TDV Yayınları, 2018), 35/565-567.

<sup>36</sup> Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*, 153, 155; Açıkgenç, "Said Nursi", 35/565.

<sup>37</sup> Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*, 155-156.

<sup>38</sup> Said Nursi visited the parliament to meet with veterans and observe the institution, where he was invited to offer a prayer from the podium, See, TBMMTD, 9.11.1922, D. 1, C. XIV, B. 135, 457.

<sup>39</sup> Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*, 152, 154; Açıkgenç, "Said Nursi," 35/566.

<sup>40</sup> Gökaçtı, *Türkiye'de Din Eğitimi ve İmam Hatipler*, 156.

<sup>41</sup> Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*, 152, 156-160.

<sup>42</sup> Açıkgenç, "Said Nursi," 35/566.

method not only preserved the cultural heritage of Islam but also enriched it with modern values. By communicating traditional religious views in clear, accessible language, Nursi was able to resonate with conservative audiences, strengthening his influence in these circles and facilitating a gradual modernization that encountered relatively little opposition.<sup>43</sup>

Nursi's resistance was primarily driven by the single-party regime's deliberate effort to reduce religion's influence—a policy that provoked fears of both personal and social disintegration. Repeatedly suspended by Kemalist authorities for his defiant actions, he skillfully exploited the social, political, and legal loopholes of the rigid secular system.<sup>44</sup> During one imprisonment, he famously remarked, "I have nothing to do with politics. I perform my acts of worship and engage with my religion. Is it forbidden to concern oneself with religion?" This statement placed the authorities in an uncomfortable position as they reassured him that they were not inherently opposed to religion.<sup>45</sup> Rather than promoting direct political activism, Nursi concentrated on capitalizing on gaps in the system—especially in religious education, where Kemalist reforms had yet to produce lasting results. His strategy was to preserve traditional religious structures within the new secular order, thus supporting modernization without open conflict. The state's failure to provide a viable alternative for everyday religious needs allowed his message to gain significant traction.<sup>46</sup>

Determined to guide the youth toward a self-reliant religious perspective, Nursi integrated scientific reasoning with traditional values, seeking to embed these ideas within the Republic's institutional framework. Notably, he maintained that his influence did not come from leading a religious order or through traditional sheikh-murid relations, but from his writings—the *Risale-i Nur*.<sup>47</sup> He asserted that these texts were the primary source for creating a spiritual bond (*Rabıta*) among believers, marking a departure from conventional spiritual hierarchies.<sup>48</sup> His followers, later known as Nur Students, gathered privately to study and discuss the *Risale-i Nur*, thus forging a collective identity centered on a text-based interpretation of religion.<sup>49</sup>

Following a political shift marked by the rise of the Democratic Party, Nursi ceased composing new Risales and engaged more directly in politics. Although he experienced greater freedom during this period, he continued to face criticism and state surveillance from Kemalist circles because of the combination of his political and religious activities.<sup>50</sup>

Even amid strict secular reforms designed to minimize religion's public role, traditional

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<sup>43</sup> Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*, 159, 161; Gökaçtı, *Türkiye'de Din Eğitimi ve İmam Hatipler*, 157.

<sup>44</sup> Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*, 152, 162.

<sup>45</sup> Açıkgenç, "Said Nursi," 35/566.

<sup>46</sup> Yüksel Taşkın, "Din, Devlet, Laiklik," *Türk Siyasal Hayatı* (AÖF Yayınları, Eskişehir 2013), 152-153.

<sup>47</sup> Taşkın, "Din, Devlet, Laiklik," 152-153.

<sup>48</sup> Açıkgenç, "Said Nursi," 35/568-569.

<sup>49</sup> Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*, 162-170, 172-173; Açıkgenç, "Said Nursi," 35/570-571.

<sup>50</sup> *Milliyet*, 30.12.1959; 22.7.1966; 23.7.1986; 5.7.1999; Subaşı, *Ara Dönem Din Politikaları*, 63.

Islamic thought not only endured but also transformed through creative adaptations. Influential figures like Said Nursi skillfully maneuvered within the constraints of the single-party regime by merging scientific insights with established religious values. In doing so, he preserved and revitalized classical Islamic scholarship through his writings, particularly the *Risale-i Nur*. His dedication to safeguarding authentic traditions while reinterpreting them for a modern era ultimately forged a robust religious discourse that continues to shape contemporary Turkish society.

### 2.2.2. Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan and the Preservation of Traditional Scholarship

In response to the absence of state-sponsored religious education during the so-called "gap years," various groups emerged to address this shortfall by adapting traditional approaches. One prominent example was the religious organization led by Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan<sup>51</sup>—later known as Süleymancılık—which remains active today.<sup>52</sup> Tunahan, who completed all levels of classical madrasa education and served as a Müderris, upheld a deeply traditional outlook rooted in the Sunni-Hanafi-Ottoman heritage, dedicating himself to transmitting this legacy to future generations.<sup>53</sup>

According to Tunahan, several measures were essential for reviving authentic religious practice. He emphasized restoring the forgotten Sunna of the Prophet and renewing religious perspectives while advocating for the revival of lost Islamic sciences through the methodologies of Ehl-i Sünnet ve'l-Cemaat (the Sunnis). He also insisted on a strict rejection of Bid'at—innovations introduced into Islam without a genuine basis—and stressed protecting students from the influence of misguided communities and religious orders.<sup>54</sup>

To prevent the decline of traditional religious sciences, historically transmitted over about twenty years, Tunahan devised an accelerated approach to religious instruction. Notably, he developed a new method for teaching the *Elif-Ba Cüz* to enhance Qur'anic education efficiency—a method that continues to underpin his organization's Quran courses. Additionally, he preferred the use of original madrasa textbooks over translations, reinforcing his commitment to authentic traditional scholarship.<sup>55</sup>

Tunahan's educational perspective represented a continuation of the classical madrasa system. He maintained an open affiliation with the Naqshbandi order and actively integrated the madrasa tradition with the order's spiritual teachings—an approach that distinguished him from Said Nursi, who, despite his Naqshbandi connections, kept such ties

<sup>51</sup> Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*, 145-149; Reşat Öngören, "Tunahan, Süleyman Hilmi," *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: TDV Yayınları, 2012), 41/375-377.

<sup>52</sup> Şaban Sitembölükbaşı, "Tunahan, Süleyman Hilmi (Süleyman Efendi Cemaati)," *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: TDV Yayınları, 2012), 41/377.

<sup>53</sup> Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*, 145, 148; Öngören, "Tunahan, Süleyman Hilmi," 41/375.

<sup>54</sup> Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*, 145, 148-149; Gökaçtı, *Türkiye'de Din Eğitimi ve İmam Hatipler*, 161.

<sup>55</sup> Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*, 145.



more discreet. Through this integration, Tunahan significantly contributed to preserving and sustaining Naqshbandi teachings in Turkey.<sup>56</sup>

Like Nursi, Tunahan faced persistent state pressure, persecution, and interrogations for his religious activities. His repeated arrests in 1939, 1944, and 1957 underscore the challenges imposed by state authorities on those determined to maintain traditional religious education and practice amid intense secular reform.<sup>57</sup>

Tunahan's efforts played a crucial role in sustaining traditional Islamic scholarship amid stringent state reforms. His innovative methods in religious instruction, steadfast commitment to authentic madrasa traditions, and integration of Naqshbandi spirituality enabled the preservation and continuation of classical Islamic knowledge despite ongoing state persecution.

### **2.2.3. The Role of the *İlmiye* Corps in Local Religious Education**

Alongside prominent figures such as Said Nursi and Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan, members of the *İlmiye* Corps played a vital role in preserving traditional religious perspectives and sustaining religious education during this transformative period. Operating largely outside direct state influence and recognized primarily within their local regions, these individuals were educated in classical madrasa systems and well-versed in the disciplines of various religious orders. They became the final custodians of a once-formalized structure of religious scholarship, conducting their activities discreetly in mosques, old dervish lodges, or private homes—especially in villages and small towns where local authorities either turned a blind eye or tacitly approved.

Central to their efforts was Quranic instruction, particularly the education of Hâfız, which served as the primary means of transmitting traditional knowledge to successive generations.<sup>58</sup> Notably, their work was characterized by the absence of a standardized curriculum or formal methodology; instead, their objective was simply to preserve established religious perspectives and compilations, ensuring their survival despite Republican reforms aimed at curtailing traditional religious influence. This informal mode of transmission gained additional significance during the rural-to-urban migration that began in the 1950s, a trend that unexpectedly contributed to the reemergence of traditionally conservative identities in urban settings.<sup>59</sup>

In addition to figures like Said Nursi and Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan, members of the *İlmiye* Corps were instrumental in preserving traditional religious views and education, operating largely beyond state control. Educated in the classical madrasa system, they ensured the continuity of religious scholarship—most notably through Quranic teachings

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<sup>56</sup> Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*, 147-148; Gökaçtı, *Türkiye'de Din Eğitimi ve İmam Hatipler*, 162.

<sup>57</sup> *Milliyet*, 30.9.1966; 31.12.1966; 18.5.1986; 23.7.1986; 12.8.1998; Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*, 145.

<sup>58</sup> Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*, 140-141, 144, 149-150.

<sup>59</sup> Gökaçtı, *Türkiye'de Din Eğitimi ve İmam Hatipler*, 163.

and the training of Hâfız—even under the restrictions imposed by the Republican government. Moreover, although religious publishing experienced a decline between 1920 and 1924 and was further curtailed under the *Takrir-i Sükûn* Law, the resurgence of print culture after 1945 played a pivotal role in reinforcing traditional Islamic discourse in modern society, thereby influencing Turkey's cultural and religious framework.

#### 2.2.4. Revival of Religious Publications and Print Culture: Influential Texts and Journals in Modern Islamic Thought

During this period, Islamic thinkers—whether operating openly with state permission or covertly—played a pivotal role in circulating their ideas through publications. Although religious publishing largely stalled between 1920 and 1924 and was later suppressed under the *Takrir-i Sükûn* Law,<sup>60</sup> conservative sectors revived the print culture after 1945,<sup>61</sup> which helped maintain a rich traditional religious discourse amid rapid modernization.

Subsequent to this era, aside from a few official publications, few substantial religious works emerged. Instead, individual initiatives forged a robust religious discourse within the constraints of the time. Notable among these were Eşref Edip's works—such as *Sırat-ı Müstakim* and the *İslam-Türk Ansiklopedisi*—Said Nursi's *Risale-i Nur*, Nurettin Topçu's *Hareket*, and Necip Fazıl Kısakürek's *Büyük Doğu*.

Throughout the single-party era, *Sebilürreşad*<sup>62</sup>—profoundly influenced by Eşref Edip Fergan (1882–1971)—emerged as a prominent advocate of Islamic ideologies. It openly engaged in contemporary debates, aiming to uphold an Islamic perspective across religious, national, and literary spheres through contributions from prominent thinkers. As modernization and Westernization intensified following the Republic's establishment, Eşref Edip—supported by proponents of these changes—found himself at the center of heated debates. He strongly opposed criticisms of traditional religious worldviews and institutions, which frequently led to periods of censorship and bans on *Sebilürreşad*.<sup>63</sup> For

<sup>60</sup> Please refer to the Law, Law on the Maintenance of Order (*Takrir-i Sükûn Kanunu*), Law No. 578, Date of Adoption: March 4, 1925

Article 1

Whoever incites, encourages, or participates in any rebellion or revolutionary movement, or engages in any endeavor or action that violates public peace and tranquility, disrupts public order, or endangers the State, shall be subject to punishment. The Government is authorized to prohibit propaganda, publications, or organizational activities related to such offenses and to refer the perpetrators to military tribunals.

<sup>61</sup> Ramazan Buyrukçu, *Kurumsal Değişim ve Gelişim Boyutlarıyla Türkiye'de Mesleki Din Eğitim-Öğretimi* (Isparta: Fakülte Kitabevi, 2007), 138; Subaşı, *Ara Dönem Din Politikaları*, 62.

<sup>62</sup> The publication of *Sırat-ı Müstakim* began on August 27, 1908. Between 1908 and 1966, the journal, published intermittently in different periods, was edited by Ebu'l-Ula Zeynel Abidin and Eşref Edib, with Mehmet Akif Ersoy serving as the chief editor and production manager. In 1912, the journal was renamed *Sebilürreşad*, and Eşref Edip took ownership of it. Like many other journals and newspapers, it was banned under the *Takrir-i Sükûn* Law. The journal was republished in 1948 under the editorship of Eşref Edib, but it no longer held the influence and strength it once had, Adem Efe, "Sebilürreşad", *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: TDV Yayınları, 2009), 36/36; Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*, 295; Subaşı, *Ara Dönem Din Politikaları*, 62, 115.

<sup>63</sup> Subaşı, *Ara Dönem Din Politikaları*, 62; Efe, "Sebilürreşad", 36/252–253; Sadık Albayrak, "Eşref Edip Fergan,"

conservative segments, Edip became pivotal not only because of his literary output but also due to his influential role in political conflicts. He notably authored a scathing critique of the Islam Encyclopedia published by the Ministry of Education—accusing it of a popular-orientalist approach<sup>64</sup>—and subsequently spearheaded the creation of an alternative reference work, the *İslam-Türk Ansiklopedisi*. This initiative marked the first significant intellectual protest of its kind, deliberately establishing a distinct body of knowledge reflecting traditional Islamic values.<sup>65</sup>

Among the era's seminal religious texts, the *Risale-i Nur* by Said Nursi is widely regarded as one of the most influential works. Written between 1899 and 1949<sup>66</sup> under notably challenging conditions, Nursi's followers painstakingly hand-copied his writings to preserve and disseminate his ideas.<sup>67</sup> The *Risale-i Nur* reached a far broader readership when its first edition in Latin script was issued between 1957 and 1959. Nursi envisioned this work as a fully self-sufficient hermeneutical exegesis of the Qur'an—so comprehensive in scope that no further commentaries would be needed—thereby reinforcing a religious outlook firm enough to withstand materialist and positivist critiques.<sup>68</sup> Consequently, studying this corpus has become central to the religious practice and intellectual engagement of his followers, marking it as a cornerstone of modern Islamic thought.

*Hareket*<sup>69</sup> emerged as a prominent journal under the leadership of Nurettin Topçu (1909–1975), initially concentrating on philosophy and art while gradually evolving into a major voice of opposition. Launched on 1 February 1939, it first approached Islamic ideas indirectly—using concepts such as ethics, responsibility, conscience, and faith—to subtly invoke an Islamic-Anatolian perspective without explicitly mentioning Islam. With the advent of a multiparty system, the journal began to address religious questions more directly.<sup>70</sup> Topçu deliberately distanced *Hareket* from the official nationalist doctrine, diverging sharply from Ziya Gökalp's vision of Turkish nationalism. Rooted in the belief that separating Turkism from Islam severs man from his soul, Topçu rejected any form of nationalism that marginalized Islam and instead promoted an Anatolian-nationalist path grounded in Islamic values rather than pre-Islamic heritage.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, his nuanced and

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*Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: TDV Yayınları, 1995), 11/473–474.

<sup>64</sup> Subaşı, *Ara Dönem Din Politikaları*, 62.

<sup>65</sup> Subaşı, *Ara Dönem Din Politikaları*, 63.

<sup>66</sup> Açıkgöç, "Said Nursi," 35/569.

<sup>67</sup> Subaşı, *Ara Dönem Din Politikaları*, 63.

<sup>68</sup> Açıkgöç, "Said Nursi," 35/569.

<sup>69</sup> The journal, published at irregular intervals in various formats and volumes, had 158 issues released during Topçu's lifetime and 186 issues published posthumously. The publication periods and dates of the journal were as follows: February 1939–May 1943, March 1947–June 1949, December 1952–June 1953, January 1966–March 1977, and March 1979–September 1980. In the final two periods, the journal's name was changed to *Fikir ve Sanatta Hareket* (Movement in Thought and Art), M. Orhan Okay, "Hareket", *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: TDV Yayınları, 1997), 16/123.

<sup>70</sup> Okay, "Hareket," 16/123–124; Subaşı, *Ara Dönem Din Politikaları*, 64.

<sup>71</sup> Okay, "Hareket," 16/123–124; Subaşı, *Ara Dönem Din Politikaları*, 64–65.

critical perspective provided a vital forum for oppositional ideas—challenging the shortcomings of Kemalism and even drawing comparisons with the Führer regime during the single-party period.<sup>72</sup>

During the "gap years," the journal *Büyük Doğu* emerged as a pioneering publication significantly influencing religious worldviews. Its first issue, released in September 1943, covered diverse topics spanning literature, politics, and religion. Despite enduring repeated interruptions, *Büyük Doğu* maintained publication until July 1978. Engaging in robust political debates and resisting prevailing policies, the journal gradually established itself as a leading voice in Islamic discourse during the single-party era. In the pre-1945 years, when religious publications were nearly absent, *Büyük Doğu* became a key reference for the spiritual orientation of young people. Closely associated with prominent conservative intellectuals—most notably Necip Fazıl Kısakürek (1904–1983), who faced multiple judicial interrogations—*Büyük Doğu* was revered in conservative circles as a "national hero" for its militant stance. Kısakürek's role significantly impacted Islamic literature and political discourse during that period.<sup>73</sup>

Both *Büyük Doğu* and *Hareket* served as vital forums for exploring Turkish nationalism and Islamic thought. Together with other religious publications and thinkers, these journals promoted a synthesis of religion and nationalism—a dynamic that has continued to shape conservative sectors of society, reflecting the enduring influence of Kemalist reforms on conservative mindsets and nationalist ideologies.<sup>74</sup>

Despite vigorous state-led secular reforms designed to reduce religious influence, a dynamic and enduring Islamic intellectual tradition emerged through individual efforts and alternative publishing channels. Publications such as Said Nursi's *Risale-i Nur*, the writings of Eşref Edip, and the critical contributions found in journals like *Hareket* and *Büyük Doğu* became essential platforms for reviving traditional religious thought. These works not only reaffirmed the significance of classical religious perspectives but also innovatively integrated modern ideas, ensuring that a rich and comprehensive religious discourse continued to flourish amid rapid modernization and Westernization. Ultimately, this blend of tradition and modernity has played a pivotal role in shaping contemporary conservative discourse and sustaining the lasting impact of religious values within Turkish society.

## Conclusion

The 1933 closure of Darülfünun's Faculty of Theology and the subsequent hiatus in higher religious education in Turkey can be understood not as a mere administrative interruption but as a fundamental reorientation of how the young Republic envisaged the relationship between faith and state. The enactment of the Tevhid-i Tedrisât Law, the

<sup>72</sup> Subaşı, *Ara Dönem Din Politikaları*, 64.

<sup>73</sup> M. Orhan Okay, "Büyük Doğu," *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: TDV Yayınları, 1992), 6/513-514; Subaşı, *Ara Dönem Din Politikaları*, 66.

<sup>74</sup> Subaşı, *Ara Dönem Din Politikaları*, 66.

establishment of the Presidency of Religious Affairs, and the imposition of standardized Qur'an courses and model Friday sermons together constituted a rigorous, centrally driven effort to subsume religious learning within a secular nationalist framework. In reshaping the contours of permissible religious knowledge, these reforms sought to forge a unified public sphere, yet in doing so they also catalyzed a powerful, if unofficial, response. Figures such as Said Nursi and Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan, together with the less-visible but no less influential İlmiyye network, innovated informal pedagogies—study circles, clandestine Qur'an schools, private publication ventures—that preserved not only the content of classical Islamic scholarship but its communal modes of transmission and interpretive plurality.

Viewed through the lens of multiple modernities, Turkey's experience illuminates how modernization need not extinguish tradition but instead refracts it through new institutional prisms. Today's theology faculties, which blend courses in tafsir, ḥadīth, fiqh, and kalām with philosophy, sociology, and history, exemplify this hybrid model: a state-sanctioned academy of religion that nevertheless inherits the intellectual ethos of the Ottoman medrese. At the same time, the resilience of tradition is manifest in private dershanes, independent publishing houses, and informal scholarly networks that continue to draw on the *Risale-i Nur*'s textual community and Tunahan's Qur'an memorization methods. In this way, a negotiated modernity emerges—one in which secular governance and religious vitality are not mutually exclusive but interwoven, creating a dynamic equilibrium that accommodates both uniformity and diversity.

The legacy of the 1933 reforms is nowhere more evident than in the dual mission contemporary theology institutions now fulfill. On one hand, they remain responsible for training imams and religious educators who will serve under the aegis of the Presidency of Religious Affairs; on the other, they aspire to be centers of academic inquiry whose scholarship informs public debates on Islam's role in society. The continued oversight by state institutions ensures that the contours of permissible religious expression remain aligned with national unity, yet the very existence of private study networks signals that the state's regulatory apparatus cannot fully circumscribe the ways in which believers engage with sacred texts and traditions. From a historiographical and sociological perspective, this study contributes a richly textured narrative of the 1933–1949 interregnum, emphasizing that what might at first appear as a policy hiatus was in fact a crucible for both official reform and dissenting pedagogy. By framing these developments as a negotiation between secular state imperatives and bottom-up religious agency, the research advances a model of “negotiated modernity” that challenges binary assumptions about secularization or revivalism.

In this light, the closure of Darulfunun's Faculty of Theology and the improvised learning ecosystems that followed should be seen not as an aberration but as central to Turkey's ongoing conversation about the place of religion in public life. The patterns of reform and resistance that crystallized during those formative years persist today,

reminding us that the relationship between secular governance and religious tradition is not static but perpetually under negotiation. It is in this space of tension—where institutional design meets communal resilience—that the future contours of Turkish religious education, and indeed of religious life itself, will continue to be shaped.

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