

# Critical Remarks on the State of Religions and Religious Studies in Hungary

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| <p>I. Religion in Hungary in an age of secularisation:<br/>politics, religion and multiculturalism</p> <p>II. The State of Religious Studies in Hungary and some<br/>Critical Remarks on its future development</p> |
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## I. Religion in Hungary in an age of secularisation: politics, religion and multiculturalism

### 1. The legal status of religions in Hungary

After the collapse of the Communist regime in 1990, the first elections in Hungary were held on 24 March 1990. However, the dictatorial constitution formed and introduced by Communism in 1949 was left intact and only amendments were made.<sup>1)</sup> These changes pledged the right of people to practice religion which had been severely limited by the former openly atheist state. In 1990 Hungary installed the most liberal law for churches allowing a very broad interpretation of the term ‘church’.

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1) TARTAKOFF, Religion, Nationalism, History, and Politics in Hungary’s New Constitution” *Global Society* 49 (2012) 360-366, (p. 363).

This (actually) meant all kinds of religious communities, including Christian denominations, world religions, sects and religious organisations. The law IV/1990 stated that one hundred persons could register a religious community as a ‘church’ and thereby be entitled to the same rights and obligations as the traditional churches.<sup>2)</sup> This meant that the Roman Catholic Church and new religious movements (thereafter NRM) enjoyed the same legal privileges. It is not surprising that many NRM, sects and cults began to mushroom in the country. It was a far more progressive law than that of Germany, Austria or Croatia where traditional and major Christian “churches have public law corporate status, which is granted by the executive after scrutiny of doctrines and practices.”<sup>3)</sup> In the Eastern European region, many post-Soviet states such as Romania, Serbia and Slovakia gave special privileges to the traditionally most prevailing churches like Orthodoxy or Roman Catholicism.<sup>4)</sup> The open or hidden form of church regulation practiced in those countries served to protect national identity which was deeply imbued by the strong nationalism which survived even under the guise of atheist Communism. After 1990 such government preference did not infringe the right of people to exercise freedom of religion because it is guaranteed for all, but it (sophisticatedly distinguished and significantly) nuanced the status of equality. Like Latvia, Croatia and Bulgaria, Hungary declared the separation of church and state in its constitution.<sup>5)</sup> Neutrality was a major concern of all states. This doctrine means that not only should a secular state not identify itself with any religion or ideology, but also it must not be institutionally attached to Christian churches or to any one single religious community.

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2) SCHANDA, Balázs: “Religion and State in the Candidate Countries to the European Union — Issues Concerning Religion and State in Hungary”, *Sociology of Religion*, 63. 3 (2003), 333-348.

3) As Balázs Schanda pointed out this is best seen through the ongoing controversy about the legal status of Muslims and Jehovah Witnesses.

4) In Romania religions be it a new religious movement, world religions or other could only reach a legal status as ‘associations’ not as churches, a legal status preserved to assure the dominance of the orthodox church regarded as the legitimate entity of Romanian nationalism. See SCHANDA, p. 337.

5) SCHANDA, p. 339.

## 2. Christian religious education and the emergence of education about religion

A special development can be traced in Hungary which is rather different from many Western European countries and has had an impact on the development of Religious Studies. As a result of the interpretation of separation of church and state, Theology cannot be integrated into state universities like it is in many Central European States. Such a discipline must be located at Church-maintained institutions of higher education. Therefore, the separation of Theology as a discipline for training ministers, Christian educators or students interested in studying about Christianity from a confessional point of view is entirely separated from other disciplines taught at secular universities. Interestingly, it is not the church which pays for the education of those students but the society at large which includes people of all worldviews. Thus, it is not surprising to see that some scholars argue that the principle of complete separation of church and state in this regard is violated as the state subsidises the social and educational activities of Christian denominations following a tradition of state and church relation inherited from the past of Christendom. The secular study of religions has found its way into university departments. However, the road has been difficult, and challenging but fortunately successful. The teaching of science of religion is supported by the state, and it is independent from ecclesiastical structures. The field of Religious Studies borrows a wide range of approaches, methods and theories from other academic disciplines. This will be discussed more in detail later in the second part.

Another interesting point is that contrary to most European states, Christian religious instruction at primary and secondary state schools is conducted by the churches and constitutes no part of the national curriculum designed by the state. It is an optional subject that is offered at state run schools. When Christian religious education (*hittan*) is offered there, the state schools have to provide classrooms and time for Christian

religious instruction carried out on their premises by teachers employed by Christian churches. Alongside the state education each Christian denomination re-established its own education systems from primary school up to university level where they also offer Christian religious education. The state and church run school follow the same national curriculum in all subjects but naturally religion education is compulsory for those who chose voluntarily to study at Christian institutions.

The changing cultural climate has resulted in the distinction between Christian religious education (*hittanoktatás, vallásoktatás*)<sup>6)</sup> and education about religions (*vallásoktatás*). There are two problems which require clarification. First, the terminologies applied to both kind of education synonymously are confusing. Therefore a clear distinction needs to be made between (*hittanoktatás*) the former, which aims to nurture a particular Christian religious faith, and the latter, where an education about religion (chiefly world religions) (*vallásoktatás*)<sup>7)</sup> is offered to promote tolerance, acceptance and cultural awareness of various forms of faith. Second, the issue is complicated further as the latter has not yet been introduced into primary and secondary education in its own right. Rather, something similar to it, the subject named Ethics will be implemented, which is about the teaching of both religious and secular ethics. Through this subject an education about world and indigenous religions and new religious movements may be smuggled into the curriculum. Regarding this situation I have a third critical observation. This development does not really enable the government and public to see clearly through teaching Ethics what a non-normative and value free education about religion should be like. Having Ninian Smart's model in mind we may say that to reduce the education about religion to one of its dimensions, ethics is an unfortunate development.<sup>8)</sup> Much depends on how this initiative will be

6) It would be better to name it *vallás(os) oktatás*. Nonetheless the term *vallásoktatás* gained currency in educational language long decades ago.

7) My preference would go to the term '*vallástudományi oktatás*' (education about science of religion).

8) SMART, Ninian: *The Religious Experience of Mankind*. (New York: Charles Scribners Sons. 1969) See a good discussion: Bryan S. Rennie, *The View of the Invisible*

handled: whether the two tracks will be clearly separated; how the new, secular teaching of Ethics will be introduced; and how the content will be designed for teaching students in state schools. Perhaps other dimensions of religious worldviews will be introduced. Finally, it is of utmost importance to clarify who is qualified to train the teachers for Ethics, an area where Religious Studies may well have a place.

Introducing secular teaching about religion under the subject of Ethics alongside Christian religious education will have its impact on society: faith, or confession based religious *education is different* from secular education about religion. Furthermore, should Hungary become more multi religious in future, the issue of religious education carried out by other world religions other than Christianity, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, may emerge and could be a future demand of those religions.

### 3. Tolerance and religion: a treasured Hungarian cultural heritage

In many of the former post Soviet Eastern European countries, Christian religious traditions which dominated culture now function as strong identity markers. In some sense there is a renewal of traditional religion. Yet the picture is complex. On the one hand, Communism managed to root out Christianity to such a degree that it produced extreme forms of secularisation like in Czech Republic and Latvia. On the other hand, there is also a strong turn towards various forms of Christian faith in the region. Religion is perceived as the depository and embodiment of a given national culture, such as Orthodoxy in Russia and Romania, or Roman Catholicism in Poland and Slovakia. Hungary's case is far more complex than its neighbours as it has had the largest mixture of various Christian denominations since Reformation.<sup>9)</sup> Toleration was a central issue

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World: Ninian Smart's Analysis of the Dimensions of Religion and of Religious Experience" *Bulletin/CSSR* 28.3 (1999), pp. 63-69.

9) Roman Catholicism, Greek Catholics, Calvinist, Lutheran, Unitarian, Baptist, and non-Christian religions like Judaism and Islam.

for Hungarian national history and the Edict of Torda in 1568 is the first European legal act of toleration which secured the right of religious views other than Roman Catholicism.<sup>10)</sup> Roman Catholics, Protestant denominations including the Unitarians who were persecuted all over Europe were given equal legal standing. Sometime later Orthodox national churches of the Hungarian Kingdom enjoyed privileges and contributed to a multi-faith society together with one of the largest Jewish populations of Europe. Hungary had a rich tradition of various faiths living together for centuries where the *religio praedominans* was Roman Catholicism but the rights of other Christian faiths and non-Christian religions was also continuously reassured. This remarkable phenomenon accounts for the very tolerant and progressive law which was passed in 1990.

#### 4. Patriotism, politics and preference for traditional forms of Christian faith

The amended constitution of 1989 was replaced by a new one in 2010. The Hungarian parliament endorsed it and a year later decided to replace law about religion (IV/1990) regulating the status of 'churches'. There were two reasons for the change. First, (the underlying argument for the change was) to stop the mushrooming of 'business churches' which took advantage of the liberal law whereby it was possible to recruit 100 persons to establish a 'church', claim state support for their activities, enjoy tax privileges and apply for a 1% tax return. This financial packet clearly was attractive to people who used religion as a means of acquiring wealth. However, it is doubtful this activity was widespread and it is unlikely that it drained the budget allocated for supporting Christian denominations, Jewish congregations and new religious movements. A second more significant reason for change in legislation relates to politics,

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10) PÁSZTORI-KUPÁN, István: "The Spirit of Religious Tolerance – A Transylvanian 'extra calvinisticum'?", in *Calvinism on the Peripheries. Religion and Civil Society in Europe* ed. Ábrahám Kovács and Béla L. Baráth (Budapest: L'Harmattan: 2008), pp. 157-181.

national identity and Christian religion. Since 2010 the ruling centre right wing party FIDESZ, enjoying unparalleled support of people who were disappointed by the former Socialist leadership with its strong remnants of post-communist leadership, decided to strengthen national identity. The role of traditional religions of Hungary, from Roman Catholicism through Protestant denominations to Judaism, came into play as the legitimate preservers of national culture.

To solve the first problem an initiative was taken by the ruling party. Many scholars, politicians and church leaders were invited by the government to be involved in planning the new law. As a result of the cooperation, various ministries of Hungarian government prepared an (excellent) bill for the parliament which considered the views of many Christian and non-Christian religious leaders as well as secular experts. It took more than a year of preparation. When this proposal based on a carefully negotiated consensus was on the table for the parliament to discuss it was unexpectedly tossed away and replaced by an entirely new proposal of just one MP. It perplexed many people that this new recommendation was passed overnight. Only fourteen Christian and Jewish religious traditions were entitled to be regarded as 'churches' from a legal point of view and the rest were relegated to the status of 'religious associations'. What is clear from the hasty action of parliament is that politicians were ill-informed about religions in Hungary and European Christian traditions because significant churches of Europe such as the Anglican, Methodist and Adventist denominations were left out of the list of 'recognised churches'. Although these churches had marginal roles in the religious life of Hungary, it attracted the attention of Western powers where these Christian denominations were strong.

The law passed as Act CCVI in 2011 and changed the former legislation into a two tier system similar to the practice of many European countries. The issue was not about the freedom of exercise of religion as it was misrepresented by political opponents, churches, NRMs and representatives of religious communities of world religions and therefore it was misunderstood by many Western European countries. It was about the

'equality' which entailed that state financial support should be given by the state to the religious communities of any kind not only to the traditionally preferred Christian churches. Naturally all religions (churches, world religions, new religious movements) lobbied hard to be included in the list of 'recognised churches', and not as 'religious associations', a new terminology introduced to distinguish between religious communities. Only the first group was entitled to receive state support. Without going into the complicated details of the ensuing discussion lasting for two years, the result is that almost all the former 'churches' were annexed into the amended law which enabled them to enjoy equality (among the equals. In other words in addition to the original 'fourteen churches', another thirteen were granted financial state benefits from the budget of a secular state.

## 5. Secularism and the cultural relevance of Christianity in Hungary

One ponders whether this legislative change was really necessary and seeks to find answers. The current Hungarian government relates more positively to the Christian heritage of Europe than many Western European countries. This stance could be interpreted as a reaction against the prevailing neoliberal subculture of European politics which is keen on urging member states to become multi-cultural countries. The multi-ethnic and religious national building has been a necessity of Western European countries like Britain, The Netherlands, Belgium, France, and Germany, inviting people from former colonies and elsewhere to boost their economies. While Eastern European countries tried to protect their national identities, their weak economies and fragile cultures rested on Christianity before it came to an abrupt end with the advent of Communism. While the West experienced a voluntary form of speedy secularisation (giving up its Christian culture and religion), Eastern and Central European countries were forced to submit to an unwanted Communist secularisation. It follows from this and other factors that the social, political, cultural and economic dynamics at play were vastly different between Eastern and Western



Europe. The role of religion and the support given to Christian religion in these countries should be seen in this context. It is wrong to label Eastern European countries nationalist, attributing to it a negative connotation, whereas accept the nationalism of Britain, The Netherlands, France and Germany camouflaged under the banner of international companies which are in fact national corporate bodies with international power and influence. Whether it is secular ideology functioning as a quasi-religion or religions in a traditional form, they are competing expressions of underlying but widely differing economic, social, and cultural interests expressed in the arena of politics. Thus, any responsible research needs to present an impartial picture of the realities about how religion and worldviews are used in politics.

Although the new constitution clearly alludes to the positive role of Christianity contributed to nation making, Hungary is a secular country with its own peculiarities.

The remarks I make expose the myth that Hungary is a Christian country. According to the national census of 2011, many respondents chose not to answer to the question of whether they belong to any religion (45.6%), which is a high figure.<sup>11)</sup> Many people believe this data is an indicator of secularisation.<sup>12)</sup> Only half of the population identify themselves with any religious traditions which meant overwhelmingly Christian denominations. Out of this religious 'half of the society', Roman Catholics (71.28%) are the largest. Then Calvinist church (21.23%) stands in second place, followed by Lutheran Church of Hungary (3.96%). I have alluded to the fact that national identity and Christian religion are strongly intertwined in the region. It is not my intention to give a detailed sociological survey to prove my stance. By and large it could justly be

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11) CSANÁDY, Márton: "The Main Trends of Hungarian Religiosity in a European Context" in *Confessionality and University in the Modern World*. ed.b by Enikő Sepsi, Péter Balla, Márton Csanády (Budapest: L'Harmattan-KRE, 2013), pp. 297-308.

12) However, it is crucial through further sociological data analysis relation to the religiosity of people to analyze in what sense these people are religious, secular and so on.

stated that only the other half indicated that any relation to religion. They indicated some kind of 'belonging', mostly to various traditional Christian churches. However, when further questions were asked about their religiosity it became apparent that they are highly secularised members of Christian denominations since churches function as 'service providers' for rites of passages (baptisms, weddings, and funerals). This explains the fact that only 10% of people belonging to any traditional Christian denominations attend church on a regular basis. Even those who sought to underline their Christian faith are not keen on practicing religion every day. Empty churches are clear indicators of secularization, but not to the same degree as in Western Europe. To evaluate and measure what is really meant by religiosity calls for further sociological research.

From the evidence above we may infer that Hungary is best seen as a secularised country of former Christendom where Christianity still has a hold on the population. I would like to make some observations here and offer some critical remarks. Since 1990 Hungary has been trying to find its path in a rapidly changing and globalising world whilst paying close attention to the expectation of Western European powers. It decided to join NATO (1999) then the EU (2004) to secure its position in the West. By doing so the political elite saw that its thousand year ties with the cultural and economic background of former Latin Christendom were renewed. Hungary dutifully copied models of western democracies and reinstated freedom of speech, religion and free movements of people and trades into its legal system. In its eagerness to fulfil the expectations of the West, Hungary sometimes forgot to protect its national interests and adjust the changes to the special circumstances of its own society. This accommodating practice is a much needed exercise of any country when encountering other religious, social, cultural, political and economic realities. The contest between various national political powers in Hungary could be seen as how this process of inculturation was envisioned by them.

## II. The State of Religious Studies in Hungary and some Critical Remarks on its future development

The academic study of religion has a long tradition in Hungary. One of the early fields of studying religion came from the field of Protestant liberal theology.<sup>13)</sup> The historical critical school in Tübingen under the leadership of Ferdinand Christian Bauer reaching its peak in the 1840s was quickly introduced to Hungary.<sup>14)</sup> Mór Ballagi (Moritz Bloch) became an ardent supporter of a scientific study of the roots and emergence of Christian religion within the multi-religious culture of Roman Empire. He was a convert to Protestantism from Judaism and had little regard for Christian dogma.<sup>15)</sup> After being appointed the first professor of theology at Budapest Protestant Theological University in 1855, Ballagi advocated the study of comparative religion. As an expert on Semitic languages he paved the way for modern liberal theology which was one of the most radical schools in Europe. His progressive approach to religion opened the door for a young generation of scholars like Ödön Kovács who wrote the first two-volume “Handbook of Religion” as early as the 1870s. Hungarian scholars were quick to respond to Western European initiatives emerging from the field of comparative religion where Egyptian, Mesopotamian and Indian religions were compared to Jewish religion by Christian theologians like C. P. Tiele, Abraham Kuenen and Christian scholars like Max Müller.<sup>16)</sup> Being able to read in German, Dutch, French and English, scholars

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13) KOVÁCS, Ábrahám: “The first Hungarian Handbook on Comparative Religion: Liberal Theology, Science of Religion and the Issue of Classification” in *New Trends and Recurring Issues in the Study of Religion* (Budapest: L’Harmattan, 2014).

14) ZACHHUBER, Johannes: *Theology as Science in the Nineteenth Century Germany: From F. C. Bauer to Ernest Troeltsch* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

15) KOVÁCS, Ábrahám: „Ballagi Mór és a Skót Misszió: megtérés, áttérés vagy kitérés? Egy liberális protestáns zsidó életútjának kezdete” [Mór Ballagi and the Scottish Mission: conversion of heart, change of religious affiliation or apostasy? The Beginnings of the Liberal Protestant Jew] *Confessio* 31. 3. (2007), pp. 109–125.

16) KOVÁCS, Ödön: *A vallásbölcsészet kézikönyve I-II* [A Handbook of the Philosophy

translated, used and incorporated into their studies the anthropological work of Waitz and David Strauss.<sup>17)</sup> Mór Ballagi was instrumental in directing the young and talented Ignác Goldziher to pursue studies in Germany.<sup>18)</sup> Later he became a prominent scholar and one of the founding fathers of modern Islamic studies in Europe. Together with Kovács, Goldziher was keen on introducing the work of Max Müller.<sup>19)</sup> Thus parallel with developments within theological education, other scientific approaches to the study of religions emerged from the field of Oriental, Turkic studies and Classical Philology.<sup>20)</sup> The Hungarian scientific environment gave an incredible support to the study of Asian languages given the Asiatic origin of the Hungarian people. Many scholars became excellent experts on Ancient Near Eastern languages following the works of orientalist and biblical scholars like Julius Wellhausen and William Robertson Smith. Others pioneered in the study Turkic languages like Ármin Vámbéry (1832-1913) and Indology like Ervin Baktay (1890-1963).<sup>21)</sup> As the scope of the academic study of religion developed, the works of Sigmund Freud were introduced into Hungary by psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczy (1873-1933).<sup>22)</sup> Sociology of religion was quickly introduced into

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of Religion I]. Budapest: Franklin Nyomda. 1876-77).

17) WAITZ, *Anthropologie der Naturvölker* (1860).

18) SIMON, Róbert: *Ignác Goldziher. His Life and Scholarship as Reflected in his Works and Correspondence* (Budapest, Hungarian Academy of Sciences - Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1986).

19) His primary sources were Theodor Waitz's first four volume *Anthropologie der Naturvölker* (Waitz 1860), Abraham Kuenen's *De godsdiensten van Israel* (Kuenen 1869-1870), David Strauss' and F. C. Baur's respective works, Cornelis P. Tiele's *Vergelijken de geschiedenis van de Egyptische en Mesopotamische godsdiensten*, (Tiele 1872) and works of Max Müller and Otto Pfliegerer.

20) HÁRS, László: "Oriental and Islamic studies in Hungary", *Islamic Studies*. 15 .1 (1976), pp. 53-58.

21) WOJTILLA, Gyula: "Ervin Baktay", In: *Hungarian scholars on India and Indology*. Ed. by L. Nyusztay. (New Delhi 1992), pp. 25-31.

22) *Disappearing and Reviving: Sandor Ferenczi in the History of Psychoanalysis* Andre E. HAYNAL (ed.) (London: Karnac Books) See also: *Final Contributions to the Problems & Methods of Psycho-Analysis*, Sandor FERENCZI, (H. Karnac Books, 1949) and *Legacy of Sandor Ferenczi*, Edited by Adrienne HARRIS and Lewis ARON (Analytic Press, 1996).

Hungarian academic life by Sándor Vida who had translated Max Weber's magnum opus by 1924.<sup>23)</sup> As a result of such a rich heritage of Hungarian scholars studying religion under the rubric of various disciplines the Science of Religion gained recognition. The first chair of history of religion was founded at István Tisza University of Debrecen in 1921.<sup>24)</sup> By World War II the study of religion at various departments of faculties of Arts at universities and theological schools was thriving. Hungarian scholarship produced such internationally renowned persons like Károly Kerényi, an expert on Greek religion, who was part of the Eranos circle together with Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell, Karl Gustav Jung and many others. The Hungarian scholar Joseph Aisleitner compiled the first Ugaritic dictionary from which all Indo-European languages stem. The prestigious Eötvös Lóránd University in Budapest provided a place for many excellent scholars of religion who represented a trend in religion studies that is labelled as history of religion school. But this blossoming enterprise of the study of religion through various methods and theories applied in historical, theological, psychological, anthropological or sociological disciplines almost came to an end with the arrival of atheist Communism in 1945. Although the study of religion was severely suppressed, scholars at various departments of theology, classical philology, history, literature and philosophy maintained an interest and were able to smuggle religion as a topic into their teaching by making some concessions to the Marxist ideology. This is best seen at the Institute of Philosophy at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences where scholars wrote about various themes of religion but in their introduction they paid homage to the party doctrine,

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23) SARNYAI, Csaba Máté and MÁTÉ-TÓTH, András: *A vallástudomány története Magyarországon 1860-1990* (The History of Science of Religion in Hungary 1860-1990). manuscript. Vida translated *Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism in German Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*.

24) BARÁTH L. Béla: "Az első magyarországi vallástörténeti tanszék alapító tanár és vallástudományi munkásságának ajánló bibliográfiája", *Tanulmányok a magyar vallástudomány történetéről* szerk. Kovács Ábrahám és Hoppál Mihály (Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2010).

dialectical materialism, praising it and assuring their vowed allegiance to the true salvific faith of Communism. As soon as the ideological walls of Soviet bloc were demolished, Hungary saw a renaissance in the study of religion. There were new possibilities to capitalise on and the hope of introducing separate departments for the scientific study of religion was entertained by many scholars of religion.

### 1. Overview of three major circles influencing the landscape of the Study of Religions

It is possible to identify three major areas which independently began to raise the issue of establishing the academic study of religion as a separate discipline after the collapse of Communism. These significant means of influence were the state universities, the Hungarian Association for the Academic Study of Religion (HAASR), and the periodical Religious Studies Review. There were many other initiatives promoting various aspects of studying a religious tradition, world religions or a separate sub-discipline of science of religion, but these did not have a clear focus. They did not intend to establish an all-encompassing approach to a modern academic study of religion like the kinds practiced in Western Europe.<sup>25)</sup> The pursuit of studying religion came from two the two academic traditions: *liberal theology and history of religion schools* located at seminaries; and various departments of faculties of arts. Similar to Western European developments, which took place in the 1960s and 1970s, Hungarian scholars felt it was time to move on to an even broader approach to religion. From 1990 many attempted to introduce courses with a view to set up departments for the *science of religion* as a separate enterprise.

Initially several scholars argued that the *science of religion* must be separated from theology and also from history of religion which were the

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25) I shall return to these issues.

most significant areas from where the *religionswissenschaft* had begun to emerge since the nineteenth century in Hungary.<sup>26)</sup> In addition to this separation, there was a need to demark the borders of science of religion from other disciplines. The relationship between the separate enterprise named 'Religious Studies' and subjects like sociology of religion, ethnography of religion and other disciplines of humanities needed clarification as to how they related to one another. András Máté-Tóth was one of the earliest champions for a distinct, separate and well-established approach to study religions with various methodologies and applying theories of philosophy, sociology, history and phenomenology in the late 1990s. Though he did not receive any formal training in Religious Studies as a Catholic theologian, he realised that there was a need for a fresh approach to an academic study of religion. Through a rigorous self-education he slowly established himself as a scholar of religion focusing on sociology as well as theory and method of religion.

The credit of establishing the study of religion as a modern, secular discipline independent of Christian theology and other humanities subjects goes to University of Szeged. The struggle is illustrated through the example of Máté-Tóth at the University of Szeged. There, a budding attempt to offer courses on the *science of religion* surfaced in a feeble circumstance under the department of Education of the Gyula Juhász Teacher Training College in 1996. Later the College was incorporated into the University of Szeged so did Religious Studies initiative moved on. It travelled a long way from offering courses on religion to developing a BA degree with specialisation in one of the aspects of Religious Studies from the late 1990s. Finally, in 2008, the department was able to provide an MA degree in Religious Studies. This has been a difficult road. However, Máté-Tóth was determined to press on. By now he had managed to

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26) KOVÁCS, Ábrahám: Egy elfelejtett útjelző tábla: a vallástudomány és a keresztyén teológia elágazása” (A Dorgotten Signpost: the separation between the Science of Religion and Christian Theology) in *Világügvelő. Tanulmányok Hoppál Mihály 70. születésnapjára.* szerk. Czövek Judit-Dyekiss Virág-Szilágyi Zsolt (Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2012). pp. 317–333.

establish a separate department study of Religious Studies within the Institute of Social Sciences in Szeged.<sup>27)</sup> The courses, conferences and publications disseminating from the Religious Studies department in Szeged made a significant contribution to the understanding of the discipline of science of religion.

Second, the Hungarian Association for the Academic Study of Religion (HAASR) played a crucial role in bringing together some of the initiatives of various scholars and promoting a study of religion. The incorporation of young scholars into the leadership of HAASR brought a fresh approach and vitality to the Association.<sup>28)</sup> After being trained in the history of religion (school) in Hungary, some of the younger generation of scholars received formal training abroad. They began to represent a much broader understanding of the subject of Religious Studies than had been previously practiced by scholars during Communism and its aftermath.<sup>29)</sup> Supported by the older generation of scholars from ethnography, cultural anthropology, by some senior scholars from the Szeged school and recently from Philosophy of Religion, HAASR launched annual conferences from 2008 onwards and continued its series of Studies in the Science of Religion (*Vallástudományi Tanulmányok*). Furthermore, under the co-editorship of Mihály Hoppál and Ábrahám Kovács, the Association began a new book series in 2010 entitled Library of the Science of Religion (*Vallástudományi Könyvtár*). Since then it has produced eleven volumes representing a wide variety of approaches to the academic study of religion. In addition to these initiatives, (the leadership of) the Association actively contributed to the establishment of European Association for the Study of Religion (EASR) and (others from the new leadership) many key players participated in and attended its conferences since 2001. Fruitful

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27) <http://www.arts.u-szeged.hu/karunkrol/intezetek-tanszek/intezetek-tanszek/?folderId=14393&objectParentFolderId=14393>

28) Hereafter HAASR.

29) However, only one of them was formally trained in Religious Studies abroad and had academic experience, the other two persons' research tangentially crossed some paths of the science of religion but well realised the need for a broad approach.



international cooperation resulted in the 10th year anniversary of the EASR annual conference in Budapest. The HAASR also strengthened ties with the International Association of History of Religions (IAHR) from 2005. It created a webpage to promote Religious Studies in 2007 which provided another platform for informing people about the proper study of religion and offered forums for discussions. The Association played a crucial role in bringing together various scholars, creating networking opportunities and offered a platform for collaborations between scholars.

Third, the Religious Studies Review (*Vallástudományi Szemle*), established in 2005 by Lóránt Bencze and Péter S. Szabó, a philosopher of religion, was the first distinct academic journal dedicated to the impartial academic study of religion. It was instrumental in laying the foundations for an understanding of the science of religion. This initiative happened in conjunction with the HAASR action plan. The journal functioned as a flagship and was an excellent tool for bringing academic and public awareness to the study of religion. King Sigismund College in Budapest, which supported the publication of the journal, established the first two year MA degree in Religious Studies in 2007, a year earlier than Szeged.<sup>30</sup> The influence of periodical and the College should not be underestimated. Owing to the initiative of S. Szabó, a long awaited dream of several scholars came into being. The journal is published four times annually and its board represents the plurality of approaches to the study of religion.

## 2. Religious Studies at Hungarian universities

### 1. *University of Debrecen*

In spite of the long tradition of studying religion in Hungarian academic life, since 1990 Hungary had only a few places where the science of religion was taught or a special form of the study of religion was offered. Ildikó Puskás, professor of Ancient History at Lajos Kossuth

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<sup>30</sup><http://www.zskf.hu/kepzesek/olvas/permalink:vallastudomany-mesterszak> (Downloaded: 10. 04.2014.)

University of Debrecen was influential in introducing modern approaches to the study of religion. She represented the continuous interest of the *history of religion school* maintained by scholars of Greek and Roman religions, Classical studies, Oriental studies and Islam. With her specialisation in Hinduism and vast erudition, Puskás introduced a specialisation for the history of religion into the five year MA in History at the University of Debrecen by the early 1990s.<sup>31)</sup>

It is interesting to observe that one of the first initiatives after the collapse of Communism appeared in Debrecen, which established the first chair of Religious Studies in the 1920s.<sup>32)</sup> When Puskás moved as the chair of Ancient History from Debrecen to Budapest her initiative proved to be short lived. This initiative only survived to some degree within the institute of History. Eight years later Judit Tóth, a scholar of Classical Philology specialising in Latin, introduced the study of religion on a broader scale than had been possible for Puskás. The University of Debrecen introduced a BA program of Religious Studies as a specialisation under the umbrella of Bologna process prescribed by EU educational directives in 2003. Acting on the opportunity offered by the Bologna restructuring of higher education, scholars of religion integrated the study of religion into one of the many specialisations in Liberal Art BA degree. Debrecen was able to integrate the study of religion into its Liberal Art BA degree offered by the Department of Education. In the beginning the course was a specialisation tailored to the needs of students who were prepared to be teachers of any given discipline at University of Debrecen. However, this program represented the various approaches to religion, unlike the earlier one which had focused mostly on *history of religion* conforming to the profile of the department of Ancient History. Another part-time BA degree program with a specialisation in Religious Studies

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31) At that time it was called Lajos Kossuth University of Debrecen.

32) BARÁTH, Béla: Az első magyarországi vallástörténeti tanszék alapító tanára és vallástudományi munkásságának ajánló bibliográfiája (The founding father of the first Hungarian chair of history of religion and a bibliographical survey of his work as scholar of religion) In *Tanulmányok a Magyar vallástudomány történetéről* szerk. HOPPÁL Mihály és KOVÁCS Ábrahám (Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2010)

was proposed in 2003, but it never materialised. Three years later the same group of scholars managed to relocate their initiative at the Institute of Philosophy. The science of religion as one of six subareas for the specialisation in the Liberal Art BA degree was offered from 2006. For various reasons this program was able to run only one single BA program between 2009 and 2012. There is still much scope for the study of religion there.

## 2. *University of Szeged*

We have already mentioned the endeavours of Szeged. The theological training of András Máté-Tóth enabled him to see the problematic issues of separating theology from the science of religion, which many of his fellow colleagues in both realms failed to comprehend.<sup>33)</sup> Today the department of Religious Studies offers a BA and an MA in Religious Studies in Hungarian as well as English. The department has been successful in promoting the study of religion as an applied science, which points to the strength of the department. The study of new religious movements in the central European region through an award from the European Research Council under the FP6 scheme indicates the academic merit of Szeged school of religion.<sup>34)</sup> The department has four members<sup>35)</sup> whose specialisations are: sociology of religion and Catholic theology; Tibetan Buddhism, Altaic languages and religions; sociology of religion; and new religious movements. It is notable that Szeged has a strong emphasis on the sociology of religion. There are no scholars of the history, anthropology, philosophy or psychology of religion there.

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33) <http://www.arts.u-szeged.hu/vallastudomány> (downloaded: 24 March, 2014).

34) *Focus on Religion in Central and Eastern Europe. A regional view.* ed. by András MÁTÉ-TÓTH (De Ruyter 2014). Forthcoming.

35) András Máté Tóth, theologian, scholar of religion, (1996, Dr. Porció Tibor scholar of Altai and Tibetan studies, (1998-), Nagy Gábor Dániel sociologist, (2005-), Szilárdi Réka researcher, (2006-).

### 3. *King Sigismund College, Budapest*<sup>36)</sup>

It has been stated how crucial a step it was to launch a new periodical promoting the academic study of religion. This school rightly promotes itself as one of the pioneers of carving out a place for an academic study of religion. Owing to the private funds of the College, the school was able to attract well-known scholars to offer an MA in Religious Studies from 2007. The two year course advertises three specialisations: history of religion, theory of religion and religion in the modern world. Students need to fulfil 120 credits during the four semesters. Most students come from the 'Liberal Art' BA course to pursue further studies in an MA in Religious Studies with a stress on one of the Abrahamic religions. Religious Studies as a Liberal Art discipline is part of the Institute of Communication and Civilisations. Recently the school saw a decline due to the termination of the contracts of Religious Studies teaching staff. It has only two full time members, S. Szabó and professor emeritus Lóránt Bencze, but relies on many excellent part time lectures, taking advantage of its location in Budapest.

### 4. *Gáspár Károli Reformed University (GKRU), Budapest*<sup>37)</sup>

Like the University of Debrecen and King Sigismund College, the study of religion at Gáspár Károli Reformed University is a new enterprise. The scholars likewise took advantage of the new Bologna education system urging Hungarian universities to offer a BA degree in Liberal Arts with various specialisations. The credit for introducing the study of religion into university education system here goes to Gábor Kendeffy who had been located at the department of Philosophy at the Faculty of Theology of Károli Reformed University. While keeping his position there he managed to establish the Department of Liberal Art at the Faculty of Humanities on 1 February 2008. There he promoted the academic study of

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36) <http://www.zskf.hu/kepzesek/olvas/permalink:vallastudomany-mesterszak> (downloaded: 24 March, 2014).

37) <http://www.kre.hu/btk/index.php/ma-kepzesek/26-vallastudomany-ma.html> (downloaded: 30 March, 2014).

religion. This three year program provides a general introduction to the history of religious tradition, and introduces students to methods and theories. It also prepares them to read ancient languages such as Latin, Hebrew and Classical Greek.<sup>38)</sup> Students pursuing an MA degree in Religious Studies may specialise in the history of religion and theory of religion. The department of Religious Studies has five full time members. Miklós Vassányi is an expert on ancient languages and native religions of the Americas. Gábor Kendeffy came to Religious Studies from Classical Studies with a specialisation in Latin literature and philosophy. Csaba Máté Sarnyai is trained as a Catholic church historian. Rita Köpeczky is a classical philologist with an interest in religion, as is Judit Anna Tóth. Structurally, Religious Studies is located within the Faculty of Art with an independent sub-department of Religious Studies under the umbrella of the Liberal Art department. This program represents a *science of religion* but the training of former scholars reveals a strong interest in the *history of religion*, as demonstrated through their specialisations in Classical Philology, Greek and Roman religions, religions of the Americas and Christian religion. It has no experts on the sociology, ethnography, philosophy, psychology, or phenomenology of religion employed full time at the department.

##### 5. *Pázmány Péter Catholic University (PPCU), Piliscsaba-Budapest*<sup>39)</sup>

The Catholic university choose to become a school for the history of religion only. It did not intend to advertise itself as a Religious Studies program. The MA course was recently accredited in 2010. It provides an excellent training for people seeking to expose themselves to the study of Abrahamic religions. The aim of the specialization is to train students in the discipline of the history of religion as well as providing philosophical

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38) <http://www.kre.hu/btk/index.php/szabadboelcseszettanszek.html> (downloaded: 28 March, 2014).

39) <http://btk.ppke.hu/karunkrol/intezetek-tanszerek/klasszika-filologiai-es-orientalisztikai-intezet/hebraisztika-tanszek/vallastortenet-ma-szak> (downloaded: 30 March, 2014).

and social science perspectives to the subject. The program is embedded in the (structure of) Institute for Classical Philology and Oriental Studies, and this combined with its connection to the Department of Hebrew secures the quality of teaching. Internationally renowned Jewish scholar Ida Fröhlich, has a deep understanding of the three Abrahamic religions that shaped European and Mediterranean cultures so profoundly. The staff is responsible for this program, as at Károli Reformed University, chiefly consists of scholars who are trained in Classical Philology, Oriental and Semitic studies. While the department at Károli Reformed University consciously endeavours to offer a wider approach to religion with its program in *science of religion*, Pázmány Catholic focuses on only the *history of religion*.

*Eötvös Lóránd University (ELTE), Budapest<sup>40)</sup>*

Eötvös Lóránd University in Budapest was one of the last universities to introduce a BA and an MA program in the *science of religion*. For anyone familiar with the Hungarian education history and the excellent reputation of this university's scholars in the history of religion school, Oriental Studies, Egyptology, Assyriology and Classical Philology departments, including László Kákossy, Károly Kerényi, Károly Marót, István Hahn, and Ildikó Puskás, this may be a surprise.

The educational program in the science of religion was started by Balázs Déri, a professor at the department of Latin language and literature at the Institute of Ancient Studies in 2010. The program offers a BA with a specialisation in the science of religion and an MA Degree in Religious Studies. The three areas of specialisations are: theory of religion, history of religion, and religion in the modern world. One of the teachers, Miklós Földvály established a Centre for Liturgical Research which has a strong interest in Christian theology. The research interests of scholars who participate in the teaching program focus on Classical Philology, Antique

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40) <http://vallastudomany.elte.hu/node/5#Alapk%C3%A9pz%C3%A9s> (downloaded: 30 March, 2014).

Studies and Philosophy. However, there is also a stress on the sociology of religion, new religious movements, ecumenism and secularism which plays an important role in dialoguing with religious traditions. These latter elements are clear indicators of the intention of the scholars to move beyond the traditional and most influential trend of Hungarian scholarship, *the history of religion* school.

### 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the development of the academic study of religion was shaped by several factors: the Hungarian Association for the Academic Study of Religion, the newly emerging Religious Studies departments or programs at the most renowned universities, the periodical Religious Studies Review, the publications of various scholars, and the HAASR Series, Library for Science of Religion. The road to establish a department for the science of religion has been difficult but successful. It is an irony of educational history that it was not the scholars and their prestige that made it possible to create chairs and teaching positions at university faculties, but the perseverance of people like Máté-Tóth and the higher education restructuring due to the Bologna requirements. The Liberal Art BA degree with its specialisation in Religious Studies was a milestone for the future study of religion. Many of the major universities of Hungary managed to introduce the study of religion, except in the cities of Pécs and Miskolc. Looking at the institutional side of Religious Studies at higher education level, it would be desirable to see a renewed interest at Debrecen University and an increase in the number of students at the already existing departments.

With the government set to introduce an elective but obligatory teaching of religion or ethics at primary and secondary school level, this offers university departments of Religious Studies (potential to step into this area with full force) huge opportunities. However, the issues of politics and religion still evolve around the relationship between the state and church. In my opinion, it is possible to develop a more pluralistic

teaching about religions whilst respecting and acknowledging the prevailing influence of Christianity. By all means conflicts should be avoided, and the public face of Religion Studies should be strengthened.

Scholars of religions need to bring more attention to the actual and practical use of Religious Studies in a modern state of Hungary and offer training centres where people can learn about world religions, Christian traditions, worldviews, and new religious movements. They should find ways of influencing politicians about the importance of knowledge about religion.

Although Hungarian scholarship has potential for contributing a lot to Religious Studies, and many scholars are interested in studying all aspects of religion, I think it is crucial for the already existing centres to work closely together. Only through collaboration is it possible to achieve more. Scholars still need to clarify terms of reference, for example, what they mean by the study of religion, need to be open to theories and methods other than their own, must avoid identifying a sub-discipline like philosophy, history or sociology of religion within the *science of religion*. The relationship between the science of religion and theology and that of history of religion still needs to be elaborated by scholars. They must learn to mutually respect each other's realms, and acknowledge that the very existence of overlap between linguistics, philosophy and history is crucial in binding them together. A new and challenging development is the entrance of religious scholars who are also practitioners of non-Christian religions into the arena of Religious Studies in Hungary. Finally it is only with a joint force of people appreciating the richness religion gives to culture, politics and society, that scholars are able to lobby for an academic recognition at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences where there is still a great degree of reluctance and enmity towards any study of religion.

Key Words: Religious Studies, science of religion, Hungary, education about religion, Christian religious education, ethics,



nationalism, Christianity, world religion, tolerance,  
legislation of religion

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<ABSTRACT>

## Critical Remarks on the State of Religions and Religious Studies in Hungary

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This paper deals with two major themes. First, it offers a survey of the religious landscape of Hungary with a focus on politics, religion and multiculturalism. In this part the legal status of religions in Hungary will be explained then, Christian religious education and the issue of 'education about religion' will be critically discussed. The study sheds lights on how religious tolerance was valued as a treasured Hungarian cultural heritage. Out of this unique in European tradition religious tolerance flourished in Hungary. Some critical remarks are made about how nationalism created a myth of a Christian Hungary for patriotic politicians. It is argued that Hungary is a secular country with a strong presence of Christian culture. However, it is also pointed out that devout religious practices are at low ebb which politicians often dismiss. Through some selected examples it is shown why 'education about religion' is vital for the country. This leads us to the second part of the paper where the state of Religious Studies in Hungary is discussed and some suggestions are made about its possible contribution to the development of 'education about religion'. Here the study presents an overview of three major circles influencing the landscape of the Study of Religions. The current situation of Religious Studies at Hungarian universities is also concisely described to demonstrate that Hungarian scholarship has a good potential to train future teachers to teach the public about religions. It is argued that 'education about religion', which is not to be confused with 'religious education' (*hittan, vallásoktatás*), is vital to promote religious tolerance for building up

a post-modern society.

Key Words: Religious Studies, science of religion, Hungary, education about religion, Christian religious education, ethics, nationalism, Christianity, world religion, tolerance, legislation of religion