

**Retrospections and perspectives:
The Study of Religions in Hungary at the University of Szeged**

András Máté-Tóth, Réka Szilárdi, & Zsuzsanna Szugyiczki
University of Szeged (Hungary)
matetoth@rel.u-szeged.hu
reka@rel.u-szeged.hu
szugyiczki.zsuzsanna@szte.hu

ABSTRACT

In Hungary, both the study of religion as an academic discipline and a degree program started in 1997 at the University of Szeged. The first department for the Study of Religion was founded at the same university in 2000. Both were initiated by Prof. Dr. Dr. András Máté-Tóth, who will resign soon, leaving the department in the hands of one of his very first students, associate professor Réka Szilárdi, Ph.D. Habil., co-author of the present paper. She has the task and challenge to reboot the program and the department and modernize the teaching materials and methods to frame the program for the near future. In her work, she is supported by a young scholar, Zsuzsanna Szugyiczki, who completed the department's BA and MA programs, and will soon finish her Ph.D.

Our paper is a result of true collaboration, with its primary goal to discuss the leading trends in the study of religions in Hungary through the development of the first Hungarian department for the Study of Religion. In describing the most important conditions and turning points, we will reveal some parallels with the paradigmatic changes of the international history of the discipline. The most important milestones are, first, the turn from theology to the study of religions represented by the work of Máté-Tóth; second, the transdisciplinary approach in the Study of Religion represented by Szilárdi; and finally, the open questions regarding the repositioning of the discipline in the scientific milieu and the public discourse in Hungary.

KEYWORDS

Religionswissenschaft, academic study of religion, University of Szeged, history

Introduction

The academic discipline of the study of religions has a long tradition in Hungary. Internationally well-known scholars like Ignác Goldziher, Károly Kerényi, and Imre Trencsényi-Waldapfel are outstanding personalities of this history. However, the study of religions as a university subject was introduced to Hungarian higher education only in 2000 at the University of Szeged. The initiator and leader of the establishment of this discipline was Prof. András Máté-Tóth, who finished his role as the head of the Department of Religious Studies in 2022. In this article, he looks back on his efforts in clarifying the disciplinary identity and boundaries and on the tensions with other disciplines dealing with religion. Furthermore, his successor as the head of the department, Prof. Réka Szilárdi, highlights the same period by sharing her memories as one of the very first students of the newly established discipline and summarises her viewpoints about the recent challenges. As the third author of the paper, Ph. D. student Zsuzsanna Szugyiczki concentrates on the expectations of the current students and highlights some possible future aspects for the department and the discipline.

In our joint paper, written by the representatives of three scholarly generations, we try to follow the topics of the identity and understanding of the discipline of study on religions from our perspective, and partly we try to explain our efforts in seeking today's relevant scientific collaborations. In this paper, we do not use the usual scientific style but the style of a narrative essay. Nevertheless, in this very personal way, we hope to contribute to the recent European history of the academic study of religions.

Foundations: from theology to the study of religions: Máté-Tóth's stance

In Hungary, in the second half of the 1990s, the time seemed to have arrived for establishing an independent university discipline of the study of religions. One of the contemporary driving forces behind this was the heated societal debates that brought religion back into the public arena. After 40 years of persecution of religion and churches (1950-1990), which can be understood in both a literal and a symbolic sense, and following the end of the era of communist and atheist censorship, the main topics of heated debate were the role of the mainline churches in Hungarian society and the place of new religious communities. Arguments based partly on theology and sociology dominated the public sphere, which was, in turn, dominated by struggles for political hegemony in the new multi-party democratic context. However, the tradition of the most important figures in the history of the study of religions in Hungary also provided significant academic motivation for the establishment of a degree program in the study of religions. Ignác Goldziher (1850–1921) and Károly Kerényi (1897–1973), who were internationally renowned and respected scholars of religion, deserve special mention (Máté-Tóth and Sarnyai 2015).

In the debates on religious issues in the 1990s, the disciplines that dominated the debate were primarily the history of religion, ethnology of

religion, and sociology of religion. In the field of religious history, the orientalist scholar of Islam Róbert Simon (1939–) stands out, whereas in the field of the ethnology of religion, Sándor Bálint (1904–1980), and in the field of sociology of religion, Miklós Tomka (1941–2010) do. Roman Catholic and Protestant theology also had a special competence in the field of religion. This competence was primarily conferred on theology via a positive political bias towards churches and not via theological work on religious issues. In public thought and in the academic sphere, too, competence in religion has been relegated to the churches. It is characteristic in this respect that in the preparations for establishing the Szeged Chair, university decision-makers insisted on consulting the local Roman Catholic bishop.

To be frank, I have never studied religious studies in a university program, and what is more, I have no degree in it. My first Ph.D. is in practical theology, my second is in communication science, and my habilitation is in practical theology. Following the academic system in Hungary, I have what is called a "grand doctorate" (*Doctor Scientiarum*) title given by the Hungarian Academy of Science in *Religionswissenschaft*. This discipline has no regular presence in the fields of the Academy. However, *Religionswissenschaft* as an academic discipline was initiated and founded in the Hungarian higher education system by myself. The University of Szeged established the very first department for the study of religions in Hungary, where I have been the founding professor since 2000. To avoid misunderstandings, I am talking only about establishing *Religionswissenschaft* in the university system in Hungary. It is the country of Ignác Goldziher, Károly Kerényi, and Miklós Tomka, to name only the most internationally well-known scientists, whose main work focused on history, anthropology, and sociology of religion. *Religionswissenschaft*, in a certain sense, was still present and embedded in the works of historians, philologists, ethnographers, and theologians as well, but as a unique and autonomous discipline, it was not present in the academic history of Hungary. Although there were significant and high-quality research conducted and publications written by Hungarian scholars about various topics of a number of religions (Hoppál and Kovács 2009; Kovács 2018; Máté-Tóth 2009; Sarnyai and Máté-Tóth 2013), we lacked nearly entirely the particular approach of *Religionswissenschaft* and the critical sensibility regarding the technical term "religion" as such.

As I started with *Religionswissenschaft*, with the academic study of religion, I found myself in the situation of Joachim Wach. He believed it was necessary to clarify the theoretical and methodological foundations of the discipline by separating it from psychology and theology. (Wach 2001) Prolegomena is the subtitle of his short but essential book published in 1924. Wach argued as follows: "It is remembered that religious studies, far from providing a viable basis for a theology, works and must work under completely different conditions" (7-8). Establishing the same distinction was my primary focus in the 1990s in order to distinguish *Religionswissenschaft*, first, from theology. At that time, the first condition was for me to accomplish the same distinction in my thinking. (Máté-Tóth 2008) I wanted to try my best not to represent and maintain *Religionswissenschaft* as a kind of crypto-theology. In the first course of introduction to the study of religions, I used the straightforward definition of the discipline in contrast to theology: *Religionswissenschaft* is not

theology; it has an outside, an etic approach different from the theological inside and emic approach. (Mostowlansky and Rota 2016; Roof 2011, p. 76) However, in this first teaching period, I used the works of many theologians who were often uncritical as scholars of religion, such as Rudolph Otto (Otto 1923), Nathan Söderblom (Söderblom 1942), and Hans Küng (Küng 1978). However, I always emphasized the outside- and the comparative perspective of the discipline very strongly.

By this point, I should make an essential detour about the language issue because it underlines what I have wanted to explain above. As a theologian in Central Europe, I have had German as my first foreign language, not English. Therefore, I have access only to literature published in German. Eventually, I found my most important disciplinary support in the works of Burkhard Gladigow, and Hartmut Zinser, and in handbooks like *Handbuch Religionswissenschaft* edited by Johann Figl (Vienna) (Figl, 2003) and *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe* edited by Cancik, Gladigow and Kohl. (Cancik, Gladigow, and Laubscher, 1988–2001) Looking back on this first phase of my work, governed and influenced by German scholars and publications, I think the deep sensitivity for the non-theological approach of the academic study of religions came from this time. Later, a shift happened as I started to read the literature in English, mainly from the US, where the discipline's borders were not so abundantly clear, or so it seemed to me at that time. As I studied the composition of departments of the study of religions programs at the best universities, like Harvard, Princeton, and Berkeley, I saw peaceful and fruitful interdisciplinary collaborations of colleagues who were coming from very different disciplines and had less theoretical sensitivity for the particular domain called the study of religions. I did not want to give up the autonomy and clear distinction of my discipline as opposed to all others interested in the research of religion without clarifying the content and the borders of their research topic called "religion." Only the flames in my warrior's heart became smaller.

In a sense, the process of clarification of the discipline of the study of religions in Hungary reflects some of the twists and turns of the international history of the discipline. Above I have already mentioned Joachim Wach's *Prolegomenon*, in which, among other things, he distinguished the study of religions from theology. This process of differentiation, which shows the intertwining of strict separation and practical cooperation in several variations (Máté-Tóth 2008), was followed by a further need for demarcation. The latter has meant a distinction between the theological and sub-disciplinary approaches to religion since 2000. As mentioned above, the Hungarian representatives of the history of religions, ethnology of religion, and sociology of religion had to be partly integrated into the cooperation in the field of the study of religions, and partly it had to be made clear that the study of religions has its own approach to religions, religious objects, and facts. In essence, it was a question of validating the cultural-scientific understanding of the study of religions (cf. Gladigow 2005).

The turning point at the 1960 congress of IAHR in Marburg can be regarded as a historical parallel. The general assembly clarified two very characteristic understandings of religion and the discipline

Religionswissenschaft. One faction was represented by Secretary Claas Jouco Bleeker, who argued as follows: “religion is ultimately a realization of a transcendent truth.” The other faction articulated an opposite view, according to which truth has a historical nature. Thereafter, some leading scholars like Werblowski, Brelich, and Eliade issued a document in order to separate the study of religion from a theological or religious agenda (Severino 2015, 2–3; Werblowsky 1960). As the disciplinary conflict in Marburg and many other debates may show, the exact definition of the discipline is partly an important duty of the scholars of religion but partly a theoretical and methodological jungle as well. The efforts of clarification were important at particular times; however, the permanent dwelling in identity questions of the discipline can make the actual work in the discipline unfruitful and useless for the broader academic spheres.

In a crucial personal conversation about the problems of the discipline Peter L. Berger gave me a partly provocative, partly healing sentence: “I’m interested”, he said, “not in disciplines, but topics.” I understood, although the consequent representation of the sovereignty of the discipline will always be a duty of the scholars of religion. Still, it is destructive to take this task as the only task of the domain. Since making this realization, I have been also more open to investigating my former knowledge in the field of theology without skidding off the runway of my discipline.

Twenty-five years ago, I started to lead the discipline of the study of religions as a pioneer. Since then, there have been two other degree programs established in Hungary, at Eötvös Loránd University and Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary. There is one journal for the study of religions published in Hungarian, and there is an association for the academic study of religion (MVT). All these academic places of the study of religions have their own approaches and perspectives. For us at the University of Szeged, the core question is the sovereignty of the discipline, so we see ourselves still as pioneers of this sensibility.

By highlighting this approach, I refer to a process in which the primary approaches to the religious subjects and the academic study of religions diverge. Let it suffice to refer here to Kocku von Stuckrad's introduction, in which he identifies sensitivity to the concept of religion as one of the primary disciplinary features of the science of religion. Religion is not a historical or social fact in itself, not a *sui generis* reality. The study of religions conceives of religion as the result of various emic and etic discourses. Thus, Martin and Wiebe take the position, with considerable provocation and generating much controversy, when they state that the various disciplines' engagement with religion does not amount to the study of religions. (Martin and Wiebe 2012)

As mentioned above, one of the motivations for establishing a degree in the study of religions was the growing presence of discourses on religion. The same argument remains valid for the survival and further strengthening of the study of religions degree. Today, the public debate is less about the role of churches in society and the dangers of new religious movements. Instead, it is about the nation-building character of Christianity and its opposition to Islam in defense of European culture. It is about the strong link between the churches

and the parties of the right, and the role of religion in creating and defending individual and community identity. Whereas thirty years ago, the mere existence and legitimacy of the discipline of the study of religions was sometimes the subject of fierce academic debate, today, its self-evident presence in Hungarian higher education and academic life is rarely questioned. The need for the academic (and unbiased) study of religion is hardly disputed anymore. In fact, many scholars, including political scientists, security experts, psychologists, sociologists, and cultural anthropologists, are dealing with issues of a religious nature. The discipline and departments are today faced not so much with the task of struggling for existence and acceptance, but rather with the task of representing specific approaches to the study of religions in the academic discourse on religion, drawing on the theoretical history of the study of religions and contemporary approaches.

Widening disciplinary borders: Szilárdi's stance

During the first two decades of our program, the emphasis was indeed on the differentiation between the study of religions and other disciplines, especially theology. This emphasis was reflected in the curriculum through the focus on religious diversity in the field of culture. The theological considerations of individual religions were outside of academic interests. This opposition to the discipline of study of religions and theology remained central to the department's standpoint. That is to say, we also understand theological ideas in the broader context of cultural studies, not as a discipline with evidentiary power, but as content extracted by human culture.

In our curriculum, the department has drawn heavily on Hanegraaff's ideas, which employ the emic and etic approach to anthropological methodology, that is, one that attempts to capture the religious essence from an inner as well as outer view: the internal identification, which is used to situate oneself within the religious context, to understand the internal logic of the phenomenon in question, and the external insight, which makes the observed phenomena describable, either in an empirical field or in a theoretical way.

The emic level is essential for a science of religion that is seriously interested in its subject and in which the researcher does not spare any effort to represent the religious aspect and does so as adequately as possible. Ideally, the emic perspective can report on what believers think, why they think it, and why they do things. The etic perspective comes about as an interpretation of this information. Through interpretation and analysis, the researcher gains insight into the internal logic of their subject within their own theoretical framework, even though their own ideas are often radically different from those of believers. However, this is not difficult as long as readers are able to distinguish between the two approaches (Hanegraaff 1996).

What has influenced our research and teaching programme simultaneously the most in the last two decades is the series of changes in the way science is conducted, which has promoted the concept of dissolving disciplinary boundaries. In this sense, religion is now a subject that can be explored through various methodologies and theoretical frameworks, preferably through the joint and collaborative work of several disciplines.

As it is widely known, the study of religion is inherently interdisciplinary in that different topics use theories or methodologies of different disciplines. In the case of conversion experiences, it uses the specifics of psychology in the study of social processes, sociology, and in the history of the origins of religions, historiography so that the religious scholar ends up with an almost interdisciplinary knowledge of the subject matter as well as a focus on the subject.

Reinforcing and taking this idea forward was the theoretical introduction of Runyan's 1997 soft synthesis of science, then what has been called Mode 2, the concept of transdisciplinarity, by Gibbons et al. (1994), which aims to establish a real connection between various disciplines. This means that while in the 19th century academic classification of science (Mode 1), research essentially followed the disciplinary structure of science, in Mode 2, research has an inherently practical purpose, so there is no separation of theory and practice, as research is always goal-oriented.

In this mode of scientific production, the production of knowledge becomes transdisciplinary, characterised by the phenomenon of applying common methodologies and models across disciplines, and by defining its problems outside/beyond disciplinary boundaries and seeking methods of solution outside them — not as cross-disciplinary cooperation, as in interdisciplinarity.

Comparing the models of transdisciplinarity and inter- and multidisciplinary, it is clear that they are not radically different approaches. While multidisciplinary is characterized by succession and interdisciplinarity by coexistence, transdisciplinarity is a real-time collaboration between potentially paradigmatically different disciplines. The study of religions, by its very nature, has a fairly easy and self-evident crossover into Mode 2. Since it has absorbed a wide range of scientific theories and methodologies since its inception, it has repeatedly drawn specialists from other fields into its various fields of research. As for the transdisciplinary trend in the stricter sense, a number of collaborations have emerged over the last few decades that have linked fields that are at a distance from each other: for example, neuroscience and the study of religions (the cognitive branch of religion scholars), popular culture theories and religious realities, political and religious discourse analysis, or even the interface between environmentalism and religious considerations. As the study of religions and its practitioners are increasingly calling for such collaborations, they are responding to international academic trends.

Transdisciplinarity no longer conceives of the idea of the lone scientist but as joint research in which representatives of different fields combine their perspectives and then develop common methodological and theoretical models.

As an applied field, the study of religions has many direct and indirect advantages. On the one hand, the concepts and research generated in the humanities, cultural and social sciences have contributed and continue to contribute significantly to the knowledge system through which human civilization is understood. Whether we look at diachronic or synchronic analyses, the cultural diversity and potential for conflict that have become a social reality in the age of globalization will be insoluble without sensitization to the study of religions. One can cite the work of Eileen Barker, who in the late 1960s set up the INFORM Centre in the United Kingdom to address social fears

of sectarianism and developed the concept and sociological basis for the study of new religious communities. A further relevant example is the significant amount of research and the numerous publications describing and analyzing contemporary Islam, in contrast to the inflammatory term 'Islamic terrorism', which has become widespread in the 21st century.

Studies that focus on, for example, the dynamics between politics and religion, the assertion of power, the history and structure of religious institutions, or even the instrumentalization of religious topos and populations, or the nature of populism, make a clear contribution to our understanding of our contemporary world. Thus, whether we consider the natural history of social functioning, intercultural mediation or conflict management, and peace processes, like all disciplines that deal with contemporary processes in an independent way, the study of religion accounts for the need that precedes decision-making phases at different levels.

For this period of the department, this seemed to be the present and the future of the study of religions. Apart from the combination of external and internal perspectives and the basic position of methodological agnosticism, it is not the specificities of the discipline that will be of interest, but the question of how something becomes "religious," wherever it may appear, how it can be interpreted, what questions we can ask, and how we can answer them.

In this sense, the subject of the study of religions can be neuroscientific approaches, genuine psychology of religion, social considerations, or even popular culture studies that show a real sensitivity to religions. We can examine brain activity during prayer, attitudes towards religions at the neurobiological level, the social and literary-theoretical aspects of the Jedi religion, the pop-cult and film-theoretical aspects, or the role and significance of the location of religious topos in horror films.

The work of a research group, thus, produces results that, on the one hand, naturally draw on the tools of various theories and methodologies. On the other hand, they create new and innovative research procedures in which the main issue is no longer discipline boundaries and the "purity" of the field in question, but the posing and solving of problems that focus on religious implications.

Supply and demand: Szugyiczki's stance

The elaborate work of differentiating the study of religions from other disciplines in the Hungarian academic discussions, which my colleagues have described above, was yet to be common knowledge when I entered higher education. Around the end of my high school years, it was clear to me that I was interested in studying religions at university. Even though I researched available majors extensively, I had no clear idea what the study of religions entailed. There seemed to be two paths to choose from for someone interested in religions: theology or the history of religions. I opted for the latter, as I was aiming for an objective perspective and was interested in more than one religion.

As there was no separate BA program in this field, I ended up applying to a Liberal Arts Bachelor's program at a prestigious Catholic university, with the intention of specializing in the study of religions. In the end, though, there were not enough applicants for the specialization to be offered that year, so I went with another choice: philosophy. The program was heavily focused on the

philosophy of religion, and it was almost exclusively related to Catholicism. It was excellent on its own terms; however, my thirst for knowledge about other religions was not satisfied. Eventually, I ended up transferring to the University of Szeged. It was still not a conscious choice but more like a second try.

Even though some time has passed since my confusion of higher educational programs, I still think there is room for improvement in terms of the information we provide for applicants. The program descriptions (Felvi: Vallástudomány szak, n.d.) use technical language, which is difficult to comprehend for high school graduates and outsiders. For example: "Knowledge of the specific research methods (knowledge acquisition and problem-solving), abstraction techniques and ways of working out the practical implications of theoretical questions in the scientific study of religion" (ibid., 8.1.a). Moreover, some sentences are general beyond what is necessary, especially in regard to the application of knowledge and employability, such as: "Ability to use a high level of knowledge dissemination techniques in the field, and to process publication sources in Hungarian and foreign languages in religious studies and related disciplines" (ibid., 8.1.b). The perspective and scope of the study of religions and the applicability of the degree should be clearly articulated. Adding to the literary resources, neither presentations at high schools nor university fairs (the most direct and personal way of contacting students) include scholars of religion.

The motivations for application also reflect this confusion. Throughout the years, my professors asked me (and my classmates) the question that I now ask my students: What motivated you to apply to this program? The answers rarely mirror conscious decisions and long-term plans. Many of our students choose it as a minor they elect in addition to their major. They either mention a vague overall interest in religions, one of the world religions, or some sort of quest for self-awareness.

Another question that leads me to the second topic is what makes students stick with this discipline. What kept many other students and me at the study of religions and the Department in Szeged was the attitude of the faculty and the way its subject was treated. Let me shortly refer to the former and focus on the latter in detail. The ambiance at the department and the attitude of the professors are open and supportive. The relatively small size of the department is an asset when it comes to supporting individual research interests. Throughout the last couple of years, the conferences, cooperation, and my study abroad program in the United States have shown me similar strengths of religious studies scholars and departments. It could be a strong point in the promotion of the study of religions to highlight that the openness and relatively small size of departments, along with the openness, do foster dialogue and contribute to a higher quality of learning.

The following story leads back to when I transferred to the Study of Religions BA specialization at the University of Szeged. Arriving in the middle of a BA program was far from ideal, yet from the very beginning, many things started to "make sense." I clearly remember Professor Máté-Tóth talking about William James's criteria of mysticism. In another class, I was reading about mysticism from a phenomenological perspective. Up until this point, I read texts which would classify as mystical; I knew the works of certain mystics and had a vague idea about possible similarities in other religions. From early on in my studies, I knew I enjoyed reading and researching Meister Eckhart's, Teresa of

Avila's, and other authors' texts from other cultural and religious backgrounds, but I had no concept of the connection between these. Learning about concepts and their application in the study of religions has highlighted a new way of thinking and talking about religions for me.

What the study of religions program provided at Szeged and what I wish to keep in the future are the following: on the one hand, an insight into the plurality of religions, and on the other hand, a solid theoretical and methodological basis to study a variety of religious phenomena. This methodological and theoretical basis provided not only an understanding but the language – the key definitions and phrases - which I was missing previously and which enabled me to talk about religions in a way I was not able to before and to study them from a comparative and interdisciplinary perspective – neither advocating for nor denying them.

Perhaps it is common sense for the majority of the readers of this journal, just as it is for me now, but back then, it was not. This was a process of discovery throughout my studies. The reason why I am mentioning it here is the understanding of the discipline in Hungary. The theoretical and methodological distinction used by Professor Máté-Tóth is still not widely understood and applied, either in academia or outside it. Here I am referring to both the distinction between theology and the study of religions and between the study of religions and associated disciplines. Therefore, I consider it something important to continue.

Third, let me refer to what I want to implement or add to the program: a pragmatic, skill- and competence-centred approach to the teaching of the study of religions. It is based on my knowledge and experiences in non-formal education and youth work. Non-formal education usually refers broadly to almost any educational event outside of the formal school system. When referring to the relation between the study of religions and non-formal education, many resources refer to non-formal education as part of religious education; for example, Altinyelken (2021) refers to critical thinking skills developed within Islamic religious education in the Netherlands. They also entail a version of religious education that is happening outside of school. An example of that is the development of skills related to emotional intelligence within the context of youth ministry work (The emotional intelligence factor, n.d.). However, here I understand non-formal education through a narrower definition, entailing “planned, structured programmes and processes” particularly focusing on developing essential skills and competences (Council of Europe: Definitions, n.d.). The synergy of formal and non-formal education is still in its early stages, while the recognition of non-formal education within higher education is slowly progressing through Open Education Resources (OERs) and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). Universities often recognize the importance of skills but advocate for their development outside of classes (ASU: Develop Skills and Competencies, n.d.) or refer to it only as something students naturally acquire through participating in classwork and projects (UVM: Core Competencies, n.d.). In contrast, The University System of Georgia (n.d.) aims to “prepare students with skills that endure over time and cross the boundaries of traditional discipline-based knowledge.” The achievement of these goals might involve “curricular reformation” and “a reworking of pedagogical approaches to allow for more skill development rather than simply knowledge transfer in coursework.”

The teaching of the study of religions could easily be combined with the development of skills and competences, such as project management, leadership, problem-solving, communication, and more. These skills may also promote the application of the knowledge students gain throughout their studies. Thorough formal education combined with good presentation skills, critical thinking, the exact use of terms, and an understanding of religious pluralism are sorely needed skills in society. These skills fit into the aims of the European Year of Skills (2023), which "...empowers people to successfully navigate labour market changes and to fully engage in society and democracy" and fosters "A workforce with the skills that are in demand also contributes to sustainable growth, leads to more innovation and improves companies' competitiveness" (European Commission – Commission kick-starts... 12 October 2022).

Based on this, I would like to include some elements of non-formal education (NFE), which is essentially based on learning in group settings. Applying this to the originally formal and frontal setup of university education is not well-established. What NFE might add to formal learning is relying to some extent on the already existing knowledge in the group. Whether or not students come from the Study of Religions BA programs, or different cultural backgrounds, involving their knowledge and expertise will not only enhance the group's learning but provide a more solid base for the individual as well. This is also an important practice in what Professor Szilárdi has referred to as academic cooperation and transdisciplinary approaches.

Furthermore, group projects and other tasks and methods based on cooperation contribute to two other important goals of non-formal education: applying the knowledge gained, and developing essential skills such as leadership, project-, time- and team-management skills, just to mention a few. We have had some great examples of similar cooperative projects in the past at the department (SZTE BTK Vallástudományi Tanszék: Kutatás, n.d.). Last, NFE stresses the individual's responsibility for their own learning experience. As much time and dedication the student invests in their studies is what will be gained for them. Incorporating self-directed learning into the curriculum can also help them in their future endeavors.

This last aspect leads to an important question: employability. As the ability to apply knowledge as well as skills and competences, being able to work cooperatively in an interdisciplinary environment and to thrive for further development are considered essential regarding the rapidly changing job market. The European strategy for universities, adopted in January 2022, among 50 actions, fosters academic and research careers, diversity and inclusion; moreover, the focus on future-proof skills, life-long learning, and the development of skills such as critical thinking and problem-solving (European Commission - Higher education, 18 January 2022).

Throughout my studies, I have witnessed and participated in some student-led initiatives related to the employability of religious studies graduates. Presentations at a local library opened to anyone, and an online blog (Reli, n.d.) was meant to promote an understanding of relevant topics from the perspective of the study of religions, such as esoteric festivals, religion, and violence, neo-pagan festivities etc., and national (IVHK, n.d.) and international cooperation in organizing religious studies conferences. CESAR is recent cooperation among seven universities representing three countries aiming to provide a Central-

European symposium for Ph.D. students studying religions (CEU: International Doctoral Conference n.d.).

But even though there is a definite need for similar professional voices, the established work positions do not reflect this need in Hungary. Hence, the development of skills and competences becomes more central. Unfortunately, as far as I know, neither do EU-funded training opportunities reflect the need for discussions about religion. My experiences are related to youth work and trainings (primarily to Erasmus+ trainings) directed towards young European individuals from various backgrounds: teaching, counselling, community management etc. These trainings often tackle migration, disability, gender, LGBTQ, cultural diversity, and other sensitive topics, but not religion. Here I want to mention two examples from the biggest European voluntary student organization's trainings on social inclusion, involving topics such as gender, migration, and disability (Eduk8: What is ESN Academy? n.d. and Eduk8: Register to Autumn Training Maribor n.d.). Somehow, among these sensitive topics, religion seems to be the most delicate. What might be the reason why it is not discussed?

Partially based on similar deficiencies in Hungary, we have been discussing the idea of adult education at our department: developing programs and providing theoretical as well as practical training for various workplaces where religion and cultural diversity plays an important role.

At this point in my work, I consider these three goals essential: to keep the theoretical and methodological foundations, to continue and develop the application of the discipline through methods of non-formal education, and to work on and advocate for the employability of the study of religions.

Closing remarks

In our retrospective and prospective overview of the last 25 years, with the beginning of the foundation of the academic discipline as well as the very first department for the study of religions and with the description of the recent approaches and understandings represented by the younger faculty, we have aimed to offer not only a brief history of the last two and half decades but also to provide an insight into the clarification and inner dynamic of the discipline. Looking back and looking at the approaches of the younger generation, the original aim seems to be fulfilled. The department and the academic program truly represent the discipline of the study of religions and not another scholarly domain. The younger faculty follow their foci of professional interest in an autonomous and sovereign way. For them, the core question is no longer what the academic study of religion means but how this discipline can provide relevant knowledge for the society of Hungary.

References

- Altinyelken, H.K. (2021) Critical thinking and non-formal Islamic education: Perspectives from young Muslims in the Netherlands. *Cont Islam* **15**, 267–285. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-021-00470-6>
- Arizona State University (n.d.) *Develop Skills and Competencies*, Available at: <https://career.asu.edu/develop-skills> (Accessed 28 March 2022).
- Cancik, H., Gladigow, B. and Laubscher, M.S. (eds.) (1988–2001) *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe*. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer.
- CEU (n.d.) *International Doctoral Conference in Religious Studies 2022*, Available at: <https://religion.ceu.edu/CESAR%202022> (Accessed 28 March 2022).
- Council of Europe (n.d.) *Definitions*. Available at: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-youth-foundation/definitions> (Accessed 28 March 2022)
- Eduk8 (n.d.) *Register to Autumn Training Maribor* n.d. Available at: <https://eduk8.esn.org/news/register-autumn-training-maribor> (Accessed 28 March 2022)
- Eduk8 (n.d.) *What is ESN Academy?* Available from: <https://eduk8.esn.org/news/registration-esn-academy-sarajevo-now-open> (Accessed 28 March 2022)
- European Commission - Commission kick-starts work on the European Year of Skills (12 October 2022). Press corner. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_6086?fbclid=IwAR0_1ehadNaesBH27Rwa0O09_jlGwUlCkOtYTifj8FSmEQnlkrV2MjRuLnw (Accessed 4 November 2022).
- European Commission - Higher education: making EU's universities ready for the future through deeper transnational cooperation. (18 January 2022). Press corner. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_365 (Accessed 4 November 2022).
- Felvi (n.d.) *Vallástudomány szak*, Available at: https://www.felvi.hu/felveteli/szakok_kepzesek/szakeleirasok/Szakeleirasok/index.php/szak/226/szakeleiras (Accessed 28 March 2022).
- Figl, J. (ed.) (2003) *Handbuch Religionswissenschaft*. Innsbruck: Tyrolia.
- Gibbons, M.; Limoges, C.; Nowotny, H.; Schwartzman, S.; Scott, P. & Trow, M (1994). *The new production of knowledge: the dynamics of science and research in contemporary societies*. London: Sage.
- Gladigow, B. (2005) *Religionswissenschaft als Kulturwissenschaft*. (Religionswissenschaft heute, 1). Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.
- Hanegraff, W. J. (1996). *New Age Religion and Western Culture. Esotericism in the mirror of secular thought*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.
- Hoppál, M. and Kovács, Á. (eds.) (2009) *Tanulmányok a magyar vallástudomány történetéről*. Budapest: L'Harmattan Kiadó (Vallástudományi könyvtár, ISSN 2061-3938 ; 1).
- IVHK (n.d.). Available at: <https://ivhk2022.wordpress.com/> (Accessed 28 March 2022).
- Kovács, Á. (2018) 'The Rise of the Science of Religion and Its Separation from Traditional Protestant Theology in Hungary: The Impact of

- Scholten, Tiele, and Pfeleiderer on the Scholarly Work of Ödön Kovács', *Numen*, 65(2-3), pp. 232–255.
- Küng, H. (1978) *Existiert Gott? Antwort auf die Gottesfrage der Neuzeit*. München [u.a.]: Piper. Available at: <https://ubdata.univie.ac.at/AC00329487>.
- Martin, L.H. and Wiebe, D. (2012) 'Religious studies as a scientific discipline: The persistence of a delusion', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 80(3), pp. 587–597.
- Máté-Tóth, A. (2008) 'Teológia és vallástudomány', *Keresztény Magvető*, 37, p. 47.
- Máté-Tóth, A. and Sarnyai Cs.M. (2015) 'The History and Recent Trends of Religionswissenschaft in Hungary', in Bubík Tomáš and Henryk Hoffmann (eds.) *Studying Religions with the Iron Curtain Closed and Opened*. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, pp. 122–165.
- Máté-Tóth, A. (2009) 'Vallástudomány a teológia árnyékában. Jegyzetek Schütz Antal „A vallás” c. dolgozatáról [Study on religions in the shadows of theology]', in Hoppál, M. and Kovács, Á. (eds.) *Tanulmányok a magyar vallástudomány történetéről*. (Vallástudományi könyvtár, ISSN 2061-3938 ; 1). Budapest: L'Harmattan Kiadó, pp. 37–49.
- Mostowlansky, T. and Rota, A. (2016) 'A Matter of Perspective? Disentangling the Emic-Etic Debate in the Scientific Study of Religion's', *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 28(4-5), pp. 317–336.
- Otto, R. (1923) *Das Heilige: über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen*. 10th edn. Breslau: Trewendt u. Granier.
- Reli blog (n.d.). Available at: <https://reli.blog.hu/> (Accessed 28 March 2022).
- Roof, WC (2011) 'Research Design', in Stausberg, M. and Engler, S. (eds.) *The Routledge handbook of research methods in the study of religion*. London: Routledge, pp. 68–80.
- Runyan, W. M. (1997). *The study of lives as a "soft synthesis" in psychology*. In Hogan, R.; Johnson, J. & Briggs, S. (Eds.), *Handbook of personality Psychology*, California, USA: Academic Press.
- Sarnyai, Cs. M. and Máté-Tóth, A. (eds.) (2013) *Szemelvények a magyar vallástudomány történetéből* (2 vols). Budapest: L'Harmattan.
- Severino, V.S. (2015) 'For a secular return to the sacred: Raffaele Pettazzoni's last statement on the name of the science of religions', *Religion*, 45(1): 1–23. doi: 10.1080/0048721X.2014.918060
- Söderblom, N. (1942) *Der lebendige Gott im Zeugnis der Religionsgeschichte: nachgelassene Gifford-Vorlesungen*. München: Reinhardt.
- SZTE BTK Vallástudományi Tanszék n.d., *Kutatás*, Available at: <http://arts.u-szeged.hu/vallastudomany/kutatasaink/kutatas?folderID=17579&objectParentFolderId=17579> (Accessed 28 March 2022).
- The Emotional Intelligence Factor: How to Apply EI to Youth Ministry (n.d.). Available at: <https://religiousstudies.yale.edu/event/emotional-intelligence-factor-how-apply-ei-youth-ministry> (Accessed 28 March 2022).
- The University of Vermont (n.d.) *Core Competencies: Skills You Will Master*, Available at: <https://www.uvm.edu/cas/core-competencies-skills-you-will-master> (Accessed 28 March 2022).

The University System of Georgia, College 2025 (n.d.), *Essential Skills*.

Wach, J. (2001) *Religionswissenschaft: Prolegomena zu ihrer wissenschaftstheoretischen Grundlegung*. 1924th edn. (Theologische Studien-Texte, Bd. 13). Waltrop: Spenner.

Werblowsky, R.Z. (1960) 'Marburg: And After?' *Numen*, pp. 215–220.

Workforce, Talent Development, Economic Development, Critical Thinking, Integration, Available at:

https://www.usg.edu/college2025/executive_summary/essential_skills

(Accessed 28 March 2022).
