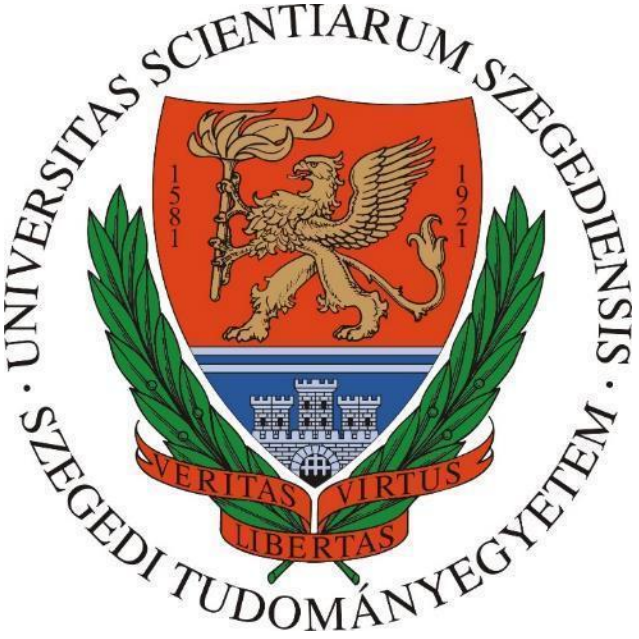
UNIVERSITY OF SZEGED
DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

FADIME YILMAZ

STATE-SPONSORED RELIGIOUS SCHOOLS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF TURKEY AND HUNGARY

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION SUMMARY

SUPERVISOR: PROFESSOR ANDRÁS MÁTÉ-TÓTH



SZEGED, HUNGARY, 2025

Introduction

The relationship between the state and religion has long been central in social studies, with states historically oscillating between support, control, or neutrality toward religious institutions (Cosgel & Miceli, 2009; Fox, 2015). This dynamic is complex and context-dependent, shaped by political, cultural, and historical forces, and constantly evolving in response to social and political pressures.

The interaction between state and religion can be classified in different ways. Ahmed (2017) identifies six approaches ranging from strong secularism (Laïcité) to strong establishment, while Mitra (1991) proposes hegemonic, theocratic, secular, and neutral models. Religion's influence on the state and vice versa is also manifested in education. Historically, religious institutions dominated education, but modernity led states to assume control, while religious schools (RSs) persisted as hybrid spaces integrating academic and religious teaching (Armet, 2009; Riley et al., 2003; Maussen & Bader, 2015). RSs provide state-recognized diplomas, employ trained teachers, and often receive governmental support.

Despite extensive research on religion and education, the specific role of RSs remains underexplored (D'Agostino & Carozza, 2019; Grace, 2003). RSs are simultaneously social institutions, educational establishments, and extensions of state-religion relations (Qian & Kong, 2018). This dual identity makes RSs contested spaces, where cooperation and conflict with the state coexist.

Problem Statement

RSs are increasingly scrutinized as European societies diversify religiously while overall religiosity declines (Maussen & Bader, 2015). In Hungary, religious revival has plateaued due to selective state support, with low church attendance among youth (Froese, 2002; Pew Research Center, 2017; Bullivant, 2018). In Turkey, atheism and non-religious identification are gradually rising (WIN-Gallup International, 2012).

Despite these trends, states continue to support RSs financially and politically, raising debates over autonomy, curricula, and administration (Merry, 2007; Walford, 2001). While governments justify RS support as restitution for past injustices, critics argue the aim is de-secularization aligned with political agendas (Inal, 2004; Barišić & Jevtić, 2018). This tension frames the study's central question: how do state-supported RSs affect students' religiosity in Turkey and Hungary?

Research Objectives and Questions

To achieve its aim, the study pursues the following objectives:

1. To explore the broader relationship between state and religion in Turkey and Hungary since 2000, identifying key dynamics and frameworks that shape this interaction.

2. To examine the role of religious schools within this relationship and compare their governance, functions, and state influence in both countries in the post-2000 period.
3. To investigate the impact of religious schools on students' religiosity since 2000.

In line with these objectives, the following research questions have been formulated to guide the study. The main research question of this study is:

1. What are the dynamics of the relationship between the state and religion in Turkey and Hungary since 2000?
2. What are the key aspects of the interaction between religious schools and the state in Turkey and Hungary since 2000?
3. What are the effects of religious schools on students' religiosity in Turkey and Hungary?

Theoretical Framework

The study employs multiple perspectives to understand religious change. Secularization theory emphasizes declining demand for religion due to modernization (Berger, 1967; Reaves, 2012), while the religious market model highlights the supply-side, suggesting that religious pluralism thrives when competition exists (Finke & Stark, 1988; Stark & Iannaccone, 1994). Desecularization theory integrates both, explaining religious resurgence as a reaction to prior secularization (Berger, 2012; Karpov, 2010). This framework is particularly suitable for analyzing state-induced religious change, such as that occurring in Turkey and Hungary.

Methodology

The study uses Document Analysis for the first two studies and Grounded Theory (GT) for the third study. Document Analysis examines secondary sources, policy documents, and archival materials to identify macro-level trends in state-religion interactions. GT, through interviews with academics, RS teachers, and administrators, captures micro-level perspectives, generating theory grounded in lived experiences.

This combination provides a layered qualitative approach, moving from general trends to specific insights, and reflects a reflexive, methodologically pluralistic design.

Study 1 - The General Structure of State-Religion Interactions in Turkey and Hungary

By analyzing the two cases through Smart's multidimensional framework (doctrinal, ritual, experiential, etc.), the study reveals striking similarities in how religion is embedded in their political and cultural systems. The findings provide evidence-based insights into the structural parallels and divergences, laying the groundwork for a nuanced understanding of state-religion negotiations in historically pluralist yet ideologically distinct settings.

Although there are many historical, societal, and religious differences, the main political structures of the two countries show parallelism. The political use of religion by the

governments is common to support and secure the stability of political power. The leaders of the political hegemony have a religious vision, although the population in both countries is not religious to a very great extent. The data showed a strong effort by both governments to draw a demarcation line between nationalist and religious people and between institutions loyal to the government and those who are against the main national aims defined by the governments. Religion in this regard is, first of all, not the religious commitment of the people but a favored discursive dimension in the public sphere and an ideological tool for political interests. This aligns with the broader historical trend in which religion has consistently served as a source of legitimacy for political structures.

In Turkey and Hungary, religion's public resurgence following state-enforced secularism exemplifies this dynamic. Rather than disappearing, religion transformed—adapting to new political and cultural contexts. This duality suggests societies may be reimagining religiosity itself, or perhaps witnessing religion's evolution beyond institutional forms. Karpov's model thus refutes unidirectional secularization narratives, urging instead a dialectical analysis of state-religion relations.

These macro-level tensions between secularization and desecularization crystallize most visibly in education systems—where, as the following comparison reveals, Turkey and Hungary deploy markedly different regulatory mechanisms to govern religious schools, despite sharing similar goals of political legitimation through religious socialization.

Study2 - Structures and Models: A Comparative Overview of Religious School Systems in Turkey and Hungary

By analyzing their respective education systems, the study highlights how each nation negotiates the tension between state control and religious autonomy. While both Turkey and Hungary exhibit significant state involvement in religious instruction, their approaches diverge sharply—rooted in distinct historical trajectories and political ideologies. Turkey's centralized oversight contrasts with Hungary's church-state partnerships, revealing how education becomes a contested arena for defining national identity and secularism.

Turkey's Imam-Hatip schools operate under direct state supervision through the Ministry of Education, implementing a carefully balanced curriculum of 70% secular and 30% Islamic instruction. This centralized system ensures all religious content aligns with state-approved interpretations of Sunni-Hanafi Islam. By contrast, Hungary's church schools maintain greater institutional independence while still operating within state frameworks. These schools receive substantial government funding but are permitted only two weekly hours of denominational instruction, with churches retaining control over religious content.

These structural differences reflect deeper divergences in educational philosophy and objectives. The Turkish model explicitly aims to cultivate graduates who embody both modern academic achievement and state-endorsed Islamic values, creating what some

scholars term "pious citizens." Hungarian schools, while equally concerned with moral formation, emphasize character development through Christian ethics without the same degree of state ideological oversight. This distinction becomes particularly visible in curriculum development - where Turkish authorities mandate uniform religious content nationwide, Hungarian churches adapt instruction to their specific denominational traditions.

Three fundamental patterns emerge from this comparison:

1.The state's role varies from direct administration to delegated authority, yet both approaches effectively reintroduce religious values into education

2.Historical context shapes each system's rationale, from post-secular transformation to post-communist restitution

3.Official narratives justify these changes through similar discourses of cultural preservation despite differing religious traditions

This analysis sets the stage for examining how these structural arrangements translate into lived experiences - a question the interview data in Study 3 will address through participants' firsthand accounts of navigating these educational environments.

Study 3- From Classroom to Belief: A Grounded Theory Study on Religious Schools' Influence in Turkey and Hungary

This section analyzes the findings of the third study concerning the impact of religious schools on students' religiosity in Turkey and Hungary, seeking to understand how institutional religious education shapes belief systems and practices. The interviews revealed – in support of the first two studies – that governments in both countries instrumentalize education as a tool for social transformation, employing religious rhetoric to this end. Beyond discursive strategies, they leverage political, economic, and institutional power to strengthen religious schools. By forming strategic partnerships with religious actors to consolidate power and legitimacy, right-wing governments facilitate the growing infiltration of religion into secular educational spaces (Neumann, 2022). However, this approach appears to backfire among younger generations, fostering religious indifference or pushing them toward atheist/deist positions. While manifesting at different intensities and contexts, this counterproductive effect was observed in both cases.

Building on the comparative analysis of religious education systems in Turkey and Hungary, this section examines the impact of religious schools on students' religiosity, highlighting cross-country similarities and differences. Using Grounded Theory, I systematically derived novel concepts from the data. Through participant interviews, I identified two key themes: (1) the prevalence of atheism/deism in religious schools, and (2) the factors driving these trends.

What makes this particularly striking is its prevalence even in İHLs. Experts in this study—including theology faculty members and representatives from the Atheist

Association—report a noticeable rise in atheist/deist tendencies. One respondent noted a surge in İHL-affiliated individuals seeking information or volunteering, suggesting that institutional religious education may inadvertently foster questioning of faith. This trend is closely tied to the state's efforts to promote religiosity through institutions like IHLs. However, this top-down approach is often seen as ineffective and even counterproductive, accelerating secularization and atheism. Respondents argued that institutional desecularization is politically motivated and does not reflect genuine religiosity, leading to deep irreligiosity among young people. This phenomenon, sometimes referred to as "reactive atheism," is unique to Turkey and reflects deep dissatisfaction with authoritarian religious structures.

Another stark contrast emerged from the interviews: CSs were consistently described as less politicized than IHLs, with the political-CS connection rarely mentioned. All respondents opposed political interference in religion (to varying degrees), though some acknowledged benefits, both in Turkey and Hungary. Moreover, pro-CS respondents criticized the government significantly more than pro-IHL respondents (both qualitatively and quantitatively). This divergence in institutional politicization parallels the two countries' contrasting perceptions of secularization trends.

In contrast to Turkey, Hungarian respondents did not perceive atheism and deism as pressing concerns, despite empirical evidence of declining religiosity. While surveys confirm that youth religiosity is rapidly decreasing—with a 30% decline in Catholics since 2011 (now 27.5% of the population) despite state church funding (Faludy, 2023)—this trend reflects broader generational shifts rather than targeted irreligiosity.

A key finding from the interviews was that religion teachers are perceived as the most impactful figures in students' lives across both countries, particularly in shaping beliefs and values. Especially religious school affiliated respondents stated that while students evaluate other subject teachers solely based on pedagogical competence, religion teachers are consistently regarded as moral role models. Given that they teach religion—a domain inherently tied to values—their adherence to the principles they espouse is scrutinized, and any behavioral deviation is met with disproportionate criticism. After family, these teachers emerge as the most influential non-familial figures for youth. While teacher-participants from both nations acknowledged this societal expectation, they also pushed back against the pressure of perceived infallibility, asserting their humanity and the inevitability of error.

The findings indicate that neither top-down secularization nor top-down desecularization (AKP/Fidesz) successfully engineer genuine religious change. Instead, both provoke resistance - in this case, reactive atheism among religious school students. When states treat faith as political infrastructure rather than lived belief, they erode religion's very foundations.

A critical finding emerged regarding political utilization of religious education: respondents overwhelmingly perceived state support for religious schools as nation-building rather than genuine faith cultivation. This instrumentalization appears counterproductive - by equating religion with political projects, it accelerates the secularizing trends it aims to reverse. The study concludes that top-down desecularization through education often reproduces the unintended consequences of earlier secularization efforts, with youth responses mediated by each country's unique politicization level and cultural expectations of religiosity.

Most respondents agreed on a crucial finding: state-sponsored religious education makes young people equate religion with politics. This connection speeds up the existing trend of youth moving away from religion through several combined factors. Because of their developmental stage and easy access to technology (and therefore information), students resist attempts to shape society through religious education. Most of the respoındents of both countries agreed that top-down desecularization doesn't find the same response among the public - meaning people don't become more religious than they were. In fact, societies - in this case students of religious schools - may distance themselves from religion in reaction. These two countries that experienced top-down secularization are now witnessing the opposite situation.

What makes religion unique in this process is its special status - the very power and sacredness that religion gives to people and institutions also makes the consequences worse when that power is misused. When religious authority gets tied to political agendas, the damage to young people's faith becomes especially severe because they judge the misuse of something sacred more harshly than ordinary matters.

Moreover, the study revealed stark differences in how religious schools are politicized. Among Turkish respondents, positions on IHLs closely mirrored political affiliations: opponents were consistently anti-AKP, while supporters either strongly backed the ruling party or offered tempered approval. This clear partisan divide contrasted sharply with Hungary's more unified stance - even CS supporters were predominantly critical of Fidesz, indicating less political capture of religious education.

These divergent responses reflect each institution's historical embeddedness. CSs enjoy broad cultural legitimacy as historic national institutions -connected to churches, making them less vulnerable to attacks. IHLs, lacking comparable deep-rooted status in Turkish society, become easier targets for political contestation. Consequently, Hungarian discourse focused on depoliticizing CSs while preserving them, whereas some Turkish participants advocated more radical solutions like closing IHLs or removing religion classes from public schools altogether.

This contrast demonstrates why comparative analysis proves indispensable for understanding religious education politics. When examined side-by-side, Turkey and Hungary reveal a fundamental paradox: despite their divergent religious traditions and historical contexts, both cases show strikingly similar mechanisms of state-religion entanglement. The parallel emergence of ideological curricula co-optation, generational backlash against politicized faith, and performative religiosity across these distinct contexts confirms Casanova's (1994) thesis about religious movements responding to similar structural pressures across civilizations.

Conclusion

While this study initially aimed to examine state-religion relations through education policies, our interviews revealed far deeper societal implications and raised new research questions. The first two studies successfully mapped the institutional dynamics of state-religion entanglements, clearly demonstrating top-down desecularization processes affecting multiple social spheres. However, Study 3's interview data provided an unexpected window into how these political manipulations of religion actually reverberate through one of society's most sensitive institutions - religious schools.

The findings expose a crucial disconnect: while states employ religious education as a tool for social engineering, the lived experiences of experts tell a different story. Three themes emerged from this tension: (1) The Boomerang Effect: Attempts to strengthen religiosity through schooling often produce the opposite outcome; (2) The Authenticity Crisis: Politicization erodes the moral authority of religious institutions; (3) The Generational Divide: Digital globalization enables youth to develop counter-narratives

These insights fundamentally redirect scholarly attention from macro-level policy analysis to micro-level institutional interactions. By documenting how national desecularization projects unravel in classroom realities, the study bridges between state ideologies and individual beliefs.

Most significantly, the research reveals religious education's dual nature: simultaneously a transmitter of state ideology and an incubator of resistance. This paradox invites scholars to reconsider education's role in the "deprivatization" of religion, suggesting that schools may be where new hybrid forms of religiosity first emerge in response to political co-optation.

Emerging organically from my grounded theory analysis, the interview data revealed a fundamental tension that redefines contemporary debates about religion and education. The striking divergence between Hungarian and Turkish respondents' perceptions of secularization - despite similar behavioral trends among youth - invites theoretical reconsideration.

The interviews revealed a striking difference between how Hungarian and Turkish respondents view declining religious practice among youth. While both countries show trends

toward atheism/deism, Turkish religious observers expressed much greater concern than their Hungarian counterparts. This likely stems from two key factors:

First, the two cultures define religiosity differently. The divergent responses in Hungary and Turkey reveal fundamental differences in how religiosity is conceptualized. Hungary's historical experience with communism created more flexible expectations about religious participation, whereas Turkey's long-standing self-identification as a 99.9% Muslim nation makes any visible decline in traditional practice more alarming, even if the actual numbers remain small. Second, the political context matters greatly. In Turkey, debates about religious schools and secularization are intensely political, with strong emotional reactions from all sides. In Hungary, the discussion remains more focused on educational quality rather than ideological battles.

As Owens (2015) compellingly argues, history shows religion hasn't lost its relevance but has instead played a crucial role in shaping modernity while simultaneously adapting to sociopolitical changes. The notion that any departure from traditional religious forms signals weakening faith represents a fundamental misunderstanding - what we're seeing is transformation rather than disappearance (Owens, 2015).

This perspective shift requires new ways of studying religion. Following post-structuralist thinkers like Asad, this question should move beyond rigid religious/secular divides and instead be examined how these concepts evolve through historical and institutional interactions. Schools provide a perfect example of this dynamic - they're not just places where fixed "religious" or "secular" ideas are taught, but arenas where these categories are constantly renegotiated through curriculum policies, classroom practices, and student responses.

Habermas's concept of "postsecular society" helps make sense of this complexity. As he explains through, we're not returning to pre-modern religiosity nor completing secularization, but entering an era where religious and secular worldviews coexist and interact in new ways. This transforms institutions like schools into spaces of dialogue and mutual adaptation rather than simple secularization (in Gorski & Altınordu, 2008).

The key insight from this scholarship is that religion remains vitally present in modern societies, just in evolved forms. As Altınordu's work shows, when we stop measuring religiosity only by traditional markers like church attendance and start recognizing its new manifestations in culture, identity and public discourse, we see religion's enduring significance. The classroom becomes a microcosm where this ongoing transformation plays out in visible ways that definitely should take place in future studies.

References

Ahmed, D. (2017). *Religion–state relations: International IDEA constitution-building primer*. Stockholm: International IDEA Publications.

Armet, S. (2009). Religious socialization and identity formation of adolescents in high tension religions. *Review of Religious Research, 50*(3), 277–297. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13644-009-0003-4

Barišić, S., & Jevtić, V. (2018). The politicization of religion and ethnic distance in Serbian school textbooks. In G. Ognjenović & J. Jozelić (Eds.), *Education in post-conflict transition* (pp. 231–250). Palgrave Macmillan.

Berger, P. L. (1967). *The sacred canopy*. Doubleday.

Berger, P. L. (2012). Further thoughts on religion and modernity. *Society, 49*, 313–316. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-012-9551-y

Bullivant, S. (2018). *Europe's young adults and religion: Findings from the European Social Survey (2014–16) to inform the 2018 Synod of Bishops* [Report]. Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society, St Mary's University; Institut Catholique de Paris. https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/benedict-xvi/docs/2018-mar-europe-young-people-report-eng.pdf

Casanova, J. (1994). *Public religions in the modern world*. University of Chicago Press.

Cosgel, M. M., & Miceli, T. J. (2009). State and religion. *Journal of Comparative Economics, 37*(3), 402–416. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jce.2009.06.001

D'Agostino, T. J., & Carozza, P. G. (2019). Extending the research orientation and agenda for international and comparative studies in Catholic education. *International Studies in Catholic Education, 11*(2), 140–158. https://doi.org/10.1080/19422539.2019.1641048

Faludy, A. (2023, October 25). Census records 30% drop in Hungary's Catholic population. *National Catholic Reporter*. https://www.ncronline.org/news/census-records-30-drop-hungarys-catholic-population

Finke, R., & Stark, R. (1988). Religious economies and sacred canopies: Religious mobilization in American cities, 1906. *American Sociological Review, 53*(1), 41–49. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2095731

Fox, J. (2015). *Political secularism, religion, and the state: A time series analysis of worldwide data*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139924610

Froese, P. (2001). Hungary for religion: A supply-side interpretation of the Hungarian religious revival. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 40*(2), 251–268. https://doi.org/10.1111/0021-8294.00054

Gorski, P. S., & Altınordu, A. (2008). After secularization? *Annual Review of Sociology, 34*, 55–85. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.34.040507.134740

Inal, K. (2004). *Eğitim ve iktidar: Türkiye'de ders kitaplarında demokratik ve milliyetçi değerler* [Education and power: Democratic and nationalist values in textbooks in Turkey]. Ankara: Ütopya Yayınları.

Karpov, V. (2010). Desecularization: A conceptual framework. *Journal of Church and State, 52*(2), 232–270. https://doi.org/10.1093/jcs/csq058

Maussen, M., & Bader, V. (2015). Non-governmental religious schools in Europe: Institutional opportunities, associational freedoms, and contemporary challenges. *Comparative Education, 51*(1), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2014.935581

Merry, M. S. (2007). Should the state fund religious schools? *Journal of Applied Philosophy, 24*(3), 255–270. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5930.2007.00380.x

Mitra, S. K. (1991). Desecularising the state: Religion and politics in India after independence. *Comparative Studies in Society and History, 33*(4), 755–777.

Neumann, E. (2021). Education for a Christian nation: Religion and nationalism in the Hungarian education policy discourse. *European Educational Research Journal, 20*, 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1177/14749041211072691

Owens, N. B. (2015). Deconstructing secularization theory: Religion, secularity, and self-hood since the onset of Western modernity. *Berkeley Undergraduate Journal, 28*(2), 1–25.

Pew Research Center. (2022, December 21). Key findings from the Global Religious Futures Project. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/12/21/key-findings-from-the-global-religious-futures-project/

Qian, J., & Kong, L. (2018). When secular universalism meets pluralism: Religious schools and the politics of school-based management in Hong Kong. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers, 108*(3), 794–810. https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2018.1467635

Reaves, D. (2012). Peter Berger and the rise and fall of the theory of secularization. *Denison Journal of Religion, 11*(3). http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/religion/vol11/iss1/3

Riley, K., Marks, H., & Grace, G. (2003). Big change question: In a period of global uncertainty, do faith-based schools re-enforce social divisions within societies and between nations? *Journal of Educational Change, 4*(4), 295–307.

Stark, R., & Iannaccone, L. R. (1994). A supply-side reinterpretation of the secularization of Europe. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 33*(3), 230–252. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1386688

Walford, G. (2001). Evangelical Christian schools in England and the Netherlands. *Oxford Review of Education, 27*(4), 529–541. https://doi.org/10.1080/03054980120086220

WIN-Gallup International. (2012). *Global index of religion and atheism*. https://sidmennt.is/wp-content/uploads/Gallup-International-um-tr%C3%BC-und-tr%C3%BCleysi-2012.pdf