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

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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Dedication

To my mother, who taught me to steal moments for books;
to my father, who gifted me his pens and patience.

This is for you—
my first teachers, my forever believers.

Originality Statement

I hereby declare that this dissertation is my own work and has been carried out under the supervision of Máté-Tóth András, Professor. It has not been submitted, in whole or in part, for any other degree or diploma at any university. All sources and contributions of others have been properly acknowledged and cited. I consent to the final version of this dissertation being made available through the university's repository and other appropriate channels.

Összefoglaló

Az állam és vallás viszonya a társadalomtudományok régóta vitatott témája. A tanulmány Törökország és Magyarország összehasonlításával elemzi e viszony oktatáspolitikai lenyomatát és az államilag támogatott vallási iskolák (SRS) diákok vallásosságára gyakorolt hatását.

Háromlépcsős összehasonlító módszertant alkalmazunk: (1) Ninian Smart vallási dimenziói mentén elemezzük az állam–vallás viszonyát, (2) az intézményi dimenzióban feltárjuk az állam és vallási iskolák kapcsolatát, (3) szakértői interjúkkal vizsgáljuk az SRS-ek hatását a diákok vallásosságára.

Az első két vizsgálat leíró elemzésre épül, a harmadik a kvalitatív adatoknál grounded theory megközelítést alkalmaz. Az adatgyűjtés dokumentumelemzésből (jelentések, statisztikák, médiatartalmak) és mélyinterjúkból áll.

Eredményeink szerint mindkét ország a vallási oktatást nemzetépítésre használja, ami azonban gyakran váratlan következményekkel jár—például vallási közönnyel vagy reakciós ateizmussal/deizmussal a fiatalok körében. Törökországban az imam-hatip iskolák politizálódása, Magyarországon az egyházi iskolák akadémiai presztízssre helyezett hangsúly túlmutat az eredeti funkciókon.

A tanulmány hozzájárul a vallás nyilvános térbeli átalakulásának megértéséhez, feltárva az államilag támogatott vallási oktatás paradox hatásait a társadalmi vallásosságra. A török–magyar összevetés eltérő politikai-történeti kontextusok mellett is rávilágít a hasonló állam–vallás mechanizmusokra és az oktatáspolitikák váratlan következményeire.

Kulcsszavak: Állam-vallás viszony, vallási iskolák, szekularizáció, Törökország, Magyarország, összehasonlító oktatáspolitikai

Abstract

The relationship between state and religion has long been one of the fundamental subjects of debate in social sciences. This study examines, through a cross-regional and cross-religious comparison of Turkey and Hungary, how state-religion relations are reflected in education policies and the impact of state-sponsored religious schools on students' religiosity.

The research adopts a three-phase comparative approach. The first study analyzes state-religion relations in Turkey and Hungary using Ninian Smart's dimensions of religion theory. The second study focuses on Smart's institutional dimension to examine the relationship between states and religious schools in both countries. The third study investigates the impact of religious schools on students' levels of religiosity through expert interviews.

The first two studies employ descriptive analysis methods. The third study uses a grounded theory approach for qualitative data analysis. The data collection process combines document analysis and in-depth interviews to ensure methodological diversity.

Findings reveal that in both countries, states instrumentalize religious education for nation-building purposes, yet this often produces counterintuitive results such as religious indifference or reactive atheism/deism among youth. In Turkey, the politicization of Imam-Hatip schools, while in Hungary the academic prestige-focused preference for church schools, leads to these institutions being loaded with meanings beyond their original functions.

The study contributes to new discussions about religion's transformation in the public sphere by revealing the paradoxical effects of state-sponsored religious education on societal religiosity. The Turkey-Hungary comparison provides valuable insights into understanding similar mechanisms in state-religion relations and unexpected outcomes of education policies, despite different political and historical contexts.

Keywords: State-religion relations, religious schools, secularization, Turkey, Hungary, comparative religious education policies

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List of Abbreviations

AKP – Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party)

CSs – Church Schools

Diyanet – Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı (Presidency of Religious Affairs)

DÖGM – Din Öğretimi Genel Müdürlüğü (Directorate General for Religious Education)

FBOs – Faith-Based Organizations

FIDESZ – Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége (Alliance of Young Democrats)

KDNP – Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt (Christian Democratic People's Party)

KLIK – Klebelsberg Intézményfenntartó Központ (Klebelsberg School Maintaining Authority)

MoNE – Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı (Ministry of National Education)

NCC – National Core Curriculum

NGOs – Non-Governmental Organizations

RE – Religious Education

RSs – Religious Schools

SSs – State Schools

Chapter One: Introduction

The relationship between the state and religion has long been a central concern in social studies. Throughout history, the relationship between state and religion has been inconsistent, at times functioning as close partners, at other times as fierce rivals, and at yet other times remaining separate (Cosgel & Miceli, 2009). This relationship manifests in various forms: some states control or restrict religious institutions, while others support all religions or declare one as the official religion. Consequently, classifying and identifying patterns in this relationship is challenging. It is a diverse phenomenon, reflecting the history, culture, and traditions of states, and is influenced by political, economic, and cultural forces. Moreover, this relationship is not static but constantly evolving, undergoing major or minor changes in response to political or social pressures (Fox, 2015).

Although categorizations are always approximate and not precise, state-religion relationships have been grouped in various studies to provide a framework for understanding their dynamic. Max Weber (1968) argued that there is no entirely secular or religious path, as both the state and religion must have some connection with each other. He focused on achieving political legitimacy in different religious contexts and described two extremes of secular-religious conflict: hierocracy and caesaropapism. In a hierocratic system, an independent religious system dominates, and secular power lacks inherent legitimacy. In contrast, a caesaropapist system subordinates the religious system to the secular state, where the state determines religious doctrines and rituals, and religious institutions are submitted to state functions. These systems rarely exist in their pure forms, as each often involves compromises that allow both the state and religion to maintain mutual legitimacy (Weber, 1968).

The relationship between the state and religion can be structured in various ways, depending on two main factors: the extent to which the state financially and/or politically supports religion, and the extent to which religion influences or controls the state. Ahmed

(2017) identifies six major approaches: 1. Laïcité (strong secularism), 2. Neutrality (weak secularism), 3. Pluralist accommodation, 4. Recognition, 5. Weak establishment, and 6. Strong establishment (Ahmed, 2017, p. 8). Mitra (1991) offers four types of state-religious institution relationships: 1. Hegemonic (one religion dominates, but others are tolerated), 2. Theocratic (state power relies on and establishes a close relationship with one dominant religion), 3. Secular (separation of state and religion), and 4. Neutral (state is unbiased toward all religions).

Although categorizations are always approximate and not precise, state-religion relationships have been grouped in various studies to provide a framework for understanding their dynamic (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Typologies of State–Religion Relationships*

Approach/Concept	Source
Weber's Two Extremes	
Hierocracy	Weber (1968)
Caesaropapism	Weber (1968)
Ahmed's Six Approaches	
Laïcité (Strong Secularism)	Ahmed (2017)
Neutrality (Weak Secularism)	Ahmed (2017)
Pluralist Accommodation	Ahmed (2017)
Recognition	Ahmed (2017)
Weak Establishment	Ahmed (2017)
Strong Establishment	Ahmed (2017)
Mitra's Four Types	
Hegemonic	Mitra (1991)
Theocratic	Mitra (1991)
Secular	Mitra (1991)
Neutral	Mitra (1991)

A comparative report on the norms, policies, and practices of different countries (Modood & Sealy, 2022) identifies three historical trajectories shaping the relationship between religion and state. The first group consists of countries with a Christian-majority past, where the separation of church and state has become a defining feature. The second group includes Hindu or Muslim countries with a colonial past, in which religion continues to play a central role in both society and politics. The third group comprises countries with a communist and imperial past, such as those influenced by the Christian, Muslim, or multi-confessional Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, or Russian empires. In these political entities, secularism was initially imposed, but over time, new negotiations have emerged regarding the place of religion in public and political life.

The relationship between religion and the state is complex and multifaceted, encompassing both collaboration and contestation. This relationship is also reflected in the state's interaction with religious institutions, including educational institutions. Historically, education has been viewed as crucial for spiritual and moral development (Lumby & Mac Ruairc, 2021). In essence, education was born out of religion from the very beginning (Armet, 2009; Özorak, 1989; Murphy, 1968; Leach, 1911). Schools were often part of religious institutions, and most educators were religious clerks. For centuries, religious institutions played a central role in education. However, with the advent of modernity, the influence of religion on the public sphere diminished, and religion became "an epiphenomenal force in society" (Fox, 2006, p. 537). States began to separate themselves from religion and took control of education and the information taught in classrooms.

Nevertheless, the need for religious education persisted, as organized education was inherently religious for centuries. With the separation of church and state, national governments began to engage in activities traditionally carried out by religious institutions. The concept of religious schools (RSs) varies by context and country. According to Riley, Marks,

and Grace (2003), RSs focus on instilling religious values and identity, while Maussen and Bader (2015) define RSs as schools with a distinctive religious character. In this context, RSs refer to primary or secondary schools that teach both academic and religious subjects, integrating them into their curriculum. These schools prepare students for national exams, employ university graduates as teachers, and offer state-recognized diplomas. Additionally, many governments provide financial support to RSs in various ways.

The freedom of education, including RSs, is guaranteed by the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Court of Human Rights. However, growing cultural and religious diversity in many societies has sparked debates about public funding, organizational autonomy, social cohesion, and role of RSs in immigrant integration (Maussen & Bader, 2015).

Although the relationship between education and religion has been extensively examined, the role and impact of RSs have received limited attention in national and international studies (D'Agostino & Carozza, 2019; Grace, 2003). Existing research primarily focuses on religious education in secular schools and the social and political controversies surrounding religion and education, with little emphasis on RSs. Due to the lack of comprehensive, large-scale studies on RSs, discussions often revolve around general arguments and counterarguments without sufficient evidence (Grace, 2003). As a result, RSs are either idealized or criticized without adequate empirical support.

Most studies on RSs aim to understand their management of religious and cultural diversity, as well as their effectiveness and impact (Martínez-Ariño & Teinturier, 2019; D'Agostino & Carozza, 2019). Some studies have also explored the economic aspects of RSs and their impact on wages in the job market (Kim, 2011; Neal, 1997). However, despite their growing popularity, little attention has been paid to the private religious impact of RSs on students, particularly after graduation (Wadsworth & Walker, 2017; McKendrick & Walker,

2020). It remains unclear how RSs affect the religiosity and spiritual maturity of their students (Mike, 2019; Uecker, 2009).

Religion shapes human behavior and development, but religiosity is not merely a personal choice; it is also a social phenomenon deeply tied to an individual's relationships with their broader social context (Adams & Marshall, 1996). Most studies highlight the role of family and religious education in the development of religious identity (Armet, 2009). Additionally, religion serves as the moral foundation for state authority and provides an institutional and metaphysical framework for social transactions (Mitra, 1991). With government involvement in religious education, RSs have become spaces where religion, education, and the state intersect. In fact, RSs are never entirely separate from state discourses but are both shaped by and shape the state. The relationship between RSs and the state is characterized by both cooperation and conflict. RSs have a dual identity as faith organizations and educational establishments, making them contested spaces for governance and state-society relations (Qian & Kong, 2018). Therefore, the state-religion relationship influences the place and role of RSs in society. Moreover, this influence has led to widespread political questioning of RSs, often without considering their primary purpose.

1.1. Problem Statement

The role of RSs is increasingly being questioned as many European countries become more religiously diverse while simultaneously experiencing a decline in overall religiosity (Maussen & Bader, 2015). The decline in religiosity has been a long-discussed topic in the literature. In the 19th century, influential thinkers predicted that religion would fade away as industrial society advanced, but this view has been increasingly criticized in recent decades. Scholars now use terms like "the deprivatization of the religious" and "desecularization" to discuss the revival of religion (Foret & Itçaina, 2012; Pollack, 2015).

Recent studies in Europe continue to highlight a decline in religious identification, particularly among younger generations. According to the European Values Study (EVS, 2022), fewer people in Western Europe consider religion a central part of their national identity, based on responses to questions about whether they see religion as part of their national identity, with a notable drop in Christian affiliation. While historically Orthodox countries have experienced a resurgence of religious identity, Catholic-majority regions in Central and Eastern Europe have not seen a similar revival. Instead, these areas have moved toward greater secularization, as surveys conducted between 1991 and 2022 proved. For instance, religious affiliation in Poland declined from 96% to 82%, in Hungary from 63% to 52%, and in the Czech Republic from 44% to 18% (EVS, 2022; Pew Research Center, 2021). These trends are further supported by the World Values Survey (WVS, 2022), which underscores the growing divide between religious and secular identities across Europe.

Inglehart (2021) argued that the secularization process has accelerated, with religiosity declining significantly since 2007. Nordic countries exemplify this shift, maintaining high levels of social trust, equality, and democratic values despite decreasing religiosity. Moreover, improved living conditions also lead to a broader decline in religious commitment. Research from the Pew Research Center (Global Religious Futures Project, 2022) indicates a strong correlation between economic prosperity and lower religious commitment, as wealthier societies show reduced dependence on religion for morality and social stability. These trends raise important questions about the future of belief systems in a secular world.

This research is a comparative study focusing on two countries: Turkey and Hungary. Studies indicate similar trends in religiosity in both countries. Froese (2001) notes that religious revival in Hungary has leveled off due to decreased religious competition. Religious enthusiasm waned as the Hungarian government subsidized certain "traditional" groups while outlawing others (Froese, 2012, p. 267). Pew Research data shows that only 12% of Hungarians

regularly attend church, and less than 15% consider religion "very important" in their lives (Religious Belief and National Belonging, 2017). Only 3% of Catholic young adults in Hungary attend Mass weekly (Bullivant, 2018). According to the 2022 Hungarian census data from the Central Statistical Office (KSH), around 42.5% of the population self-identified as Christians (including approximately 27.5% Catholics and about 9.8% Calvinists), while 40.1% chose not to declare any religious affiliation, and 16.1% explicitly identified as having no religion (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2023). These figures indicate a significant decline in visible religiosity in Hungary and reinforce the trends observed in earlier studies.

Similarly, the number of atheists in Turkey is slowly but steadily increasing. WIN/Gallup International's "Religion and Atheism Index" shows a notable shift between 2005 and 2012, not from faith to atheism but from self-identifying as "religious" to "not religious" (WIN-Gallup International, 2012). Two studies conducted by Konda in 2011 and 2021 revealed an increase of nonbelievers from 2% to 7%, while those identifying as religious dropped from 57% to 50% (Konda Research and Consultancy, 2022). This shift is particularly pronounced among young people. A "Generation Z Survey" conducted in Turkey with 1,062 participants aged 20 and under found that 15.7% fulfilled religious requirements like praying and fasting, while 55.8% did not, and 28.5% identified as nonbelievers (Zeyrek, 2020).

The data above provides a clear picture of the situation in Turkey and Hungary. Interestingly, many countries are now supporting RSs financially and politically (Merry, 2007). Despite constitutional protections for faith-based schools in Europe, this support has sparked debates about public funding, organizational autonomy, teaching methods, and administration. The autonomy of RSs is particularly questioned, as state support often leads to increased regulation (Walford, 2001).

Similarly, the political role of religious education has come under scrutiny in Turkey and Hungary. In Turkey, state control over religious education is increasing, while in Hungary,

the number of church-supported schools is growing. Since the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party-AKP) came to power in Turkey, there has been significant support for religious education, resulting in a rise in the number of RSs. In 2021, there were 1,672 religious high schools and 3,427 lower secondary RSs, with 23% of government funding (approximately 1.68 billion dollars) allocated to them (Inal, 2004; Millî Eğitim İstatistikleri, 2021; Genç, 2018).

In Hungary, the Orbán government has actively supported the transfer of municipal schools to churches, including previously non-religious schools (Rosta, 2012). Critics argue that this is not about rectifying past injustices but about de-secularizing the school system. According to the Statistical Yearbook of Public Education and the Central Statistical Office, the number of church-run schools has doubled in the last 8-10 years, from 197 primary schools and 108 secondary schools in 2010/2011 to 378 and 172, respectively, by 2019 (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2020). This increase is partly due to financial difficulties faced by municipalities, which receive less funding to maintain schools, while church schools receive government grants.

Governments defend their support for RSs as a means of compensating for past injustices. However, critics argue that the real aim is to de-secularize the school system in line with political agendas. According to Inal (2004), education, curricula, and textbooks reflect political power and the state's relationship with civil society and non-governmental organizations. Moreover, religious school textbooks often promote national identity through hidden curricula (Barišić & Jevtić, 2018; Lisovskaya, 2016; Profis, 2016).

The contradiction between the stated aims and outcomes of RSs forms the basis of this study. Despite increasing state support for RSs, religiosity, particularly among young people, is declining in both Turkey and Hungary. RSs are defined as schools aimed at raising a new generation with religious values, but the question remains: Do they fulfill this aim? If not, why?

The main goal of this research is to understand the impact of state-supported RSs on the religiosity of students in Turkey and Hungary. This is a hotly debated topic with limited academic research, necessitating a broad perspective to fully understand the issue. The time frame of this research is roughly the period after 2000, corresponding to the governance of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey and Viktor Orbán in Hungary. To this end, the research is divided into three studies, elaborated below.

1. First Study: Beginning with a broad perspective, this study addresses the overarching question of how the state interacts with religion and vice versa in Turkey and Hungary. Data will be collected from secondary sources, and a descriptive approach will be used, with Ninian Smart's (1996, 1999) concept of the dimensions of religion serving as a framework. Smart's dimensions provide a structured model for exploring the nature of state-religion relationships and allow for a comparative analysis of the two countries.

2. Second Study: Building upon the previous study, this research narrows its focus to RSs as part of the institutional dimension of Smart's theory. It examines the relationship between states and RSs in Turkey and Hungary, comparing their similarities and differences in the context of globalization. This study is also descriptive and uses a framework derived and modified from Schreiner (2001), Blinkova & Vermeer (2016), and Schweitzer (2006) to analyze data from secondary sources such as official reports, newspapers, statistics, and articles.

3. Third Study: Further refining the scope, the final study shifts its attention to the impact of RSs on the religiosity of their students. The private religious impact of RSs on students, particularly after graduation, has been neglected (Wadsworth & Walker, 2017; McKendrick & Walker, 2020). This study will conduct face-to-face interviews with experts, including academics, RS teachers, educational bureaucrats, and administrators, to explore their

perceptions of RS impacts. The study follows a qualitative, grounded-theory design to guide data collection and analysis.

1.2. 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.

By employing a combination of document analysis and qualitative interviews, this study seeks to generate a comprehensive understanding of the state-religion relationship, the governance of RSs, and their broader societal impact.

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?

The findings of these studies will be discussed in light of theories such as secularization and desecularization to explore the causes of religious changes in society. However, as this is a comparative study, it is important to provide a brief historical background of Turkey and Hungary to justify their selection and demonstrate their relevance to the state-religion relationship.

1.3. Justification of the Research

This section outlines the motivations behind this research and explains its significance, as well as the reasons that led the researcher to undertake this work.

This research adopts a comparative approach across different religions and regions to generate empirically grounded, generalizable insights concerning religious politics (Altınordu, 2013). Without comparison, many religious-political phenomena are often interpreted as the direct outcome of particular religious doctrines or attributed to the political culture of specific regions. As Altınordu (2010) emphasizes, cross-religious and cross-regional comparisons provide an especially suitable perspective to examine whether certain political processes are unique to specific religions or regions, enabling researchers to reach generalizable conclusions about religious politics.

The current literature on religious politics predominantly focuses on political movements in the Muslim world (Somer, 2016; Hadiz, 2013; Karasipahi, 2009; Yılmaz, 2015; Kirdiş, 2018; Gümüşçü, 2010). There is also a substantial body of work concerned with Christian democracy (Tomka, 1991, 1995, 2005; Sarkissian, 2009; Richardson, 2006). However, comparative studies that examine the politics of religion across different religions and regions are scarce. Below, I review some of these studies.

Casanova (2005) compares old Catholic and new Muslim politics to challenge secularist assumptions prevalent in the social sciences, especially in political science, regarding the link between religion and politics. He also examines the intersections of religion, gender, and politics in Catholic and Muslim countries (Casanova, 2017). Using evidence from long-term ruling religious-populist political parties, Yabancı and Taleski (2017) focus on "how and why religion can be an instrument for populist politics at three levels: (i) discursive, (ii) public policy, and (iii) institutionalized alliances with religious authorities" (p. 1).

A comparative analysis of the Belgian Catholic Party and the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front provides another example of how religious notions and symbols are utilized by political parties (Kalyvas, 2000). Marsh (2011) compares the shift from forced secularization to forced desecularization in Russia and China, proposing two distinct types of desecularization. In China, although there is a revival of individual religious belief, religion remains excluded from political institutions and the public sphere. In contrast, Russian desecularization involves the strong reassertion of religion "into Russian politics, culture, society, and even the arts, as it attempts to regain its historical influence" (p. 259). Rubin (2013) compares the determinants of the role of religion in the new political regimes of Israel and Turkey.

Altınordu (2013) examines the rise and transformation of the German Center Party (1848–1914) and of Turkish Islamic parties (1970–2011), arguing that he found significant structural parallels between these religious parties. He comparatively analyzes the politicization of German Catholicism and Turkish Islam, proposing that religious revival is unlikely to lead to the politicization of religion unless it faces significant social counter-mobilization and state repression (Altınordu, 2010).

Few studies explore the different dimensions of religion. Ohm (2011) questions whether the increased visibility of religion in mass media impacts religious visibility in the public and state spheres and, moreover, contributes to a process of desecularization in India and Turkey. Genç, Avest, and Miedema (2011) compare the Turkish and Dutch educational systems regarding the role of religion(s) in education.

Cross-religious and cross-regional studies, on the one hand, provide the opportunity to identify general mechanisms of the phenomena under study and, on the other hand, "provide checks against the tendency to draw unwarranted theoretical generalizations based on findings from specific settings" (Altınordu, 2013, p. 584). Moreover, comparing two different religious

and historical settings demonstrates that generalizations derived from specific contexts are not universally applicable.

The reviewed literature clearly shows that, despite the importance of this approach, there are insufficient studies employing it. This is particularly evident in research on Muslim and Christian politics. Identifying common patterns or drawing conclusions from Western or Christian cases is more common in social science than Western/Eastern or Christian/Muslim comparisons. "As a result, structural similarities in the social activism, organizational forms, and political engagements of these religious traditions are left unexplored" (Altınordu, 2013, p. 585).

Furthermore, there is a gap in the current literature on the state-religion relationship. There is a need for comparative studies among countries with different historical and religious traditions. As indicated in the review, the majority of research focuses on comparing the same or similar traditions, which is unlikely to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue. This study employs a comparative approach to highlight similarities and/or dissimilarities between the religious politics of Turkey and Hungary, aiming to identify a more universal pattern. Additionally, the comparison will not be limited to the religious politics of the two countries but will also encompass their religious education policies, both within and between them.

To identify a theoretical model for examining the topic, trends in the literature are discussed chronologically in the following chapter. First, the literature on secularization theory is explored, followed by the supply-side theory, which emerged as a response to secularization theory. Finally, the desecularization theory is analyzed, and the reasons for choosing it as the framework for this study are explained.

Recent studies on religious revival primarily focus on validating or falsifying secularization theory using examples from the USA, Asia, or post-communist countries.

Additionally, research on the revival of religion and its relationship with state-religion interaction has provided evidence supporting desecularization theory. However, these studies often fail to operationalize the different aspects of religion to provide a comprehensive picture of desecularizing patterns in the respective countries.

Using Karpov's (2010) conceptualization of desecularization, this study emphasizes the direction of the desecularizing process. Karpov elucidates two directions: 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' movements, determined by the actors involved in the process. Understanding the direction of religious revival will provide clarity on the state's role in religious resurgence.

One of the significant aspects of this study is how religiosity is operationalized. To assess the state's impact on religion, the dimensions of religion must first be defined. This study employs Ninian Smart's model of the seven dimensions of religion as a framework to observe religious changes in both countries. Existing literature often focuses on only one dimension of religion without connecting it to others. Most studies rely on survey research, reporting "aggregate trends in individual-level subjective consciousness and self-reported behavior. Such studies are indispensable for tracking declines and resurgences in mass beliefs and practices" (Karpov, 2010, p. 10–11), but they do not assess other features of religion. In particular, the cultural and material aspects of religious decline and resurgence have not received sufficient attention. Studying religion through this comprehensive model will reveal how religion is (or is not) asserting itself into the public sphere.

This study analyzes Turkish and Hungarian religious politics with a focus on religious education and its impacts on students through a common framework. This comparative perspective suggests that Islamic politics are not incommensurable with Christian experiences. Rather than being direct products of religions, these politics reflect patterns of religious activism and political interaction. Furthermore, the literature indicates that forced secularization or desecularization, regardless of direction, tends to reverse societal tendencies.

Forced secularization has led to religious resurgence, while forced desecularization is prompting people to question religion. This study seeks to uncover secularizing and desecularizing patterns across regions and religions, aiming to fill a significant gap in the literature.

1.4. Historical Background

Turkey and Hungary represent two countries with distinct religious traditions. However, despite their religious differences, both nations have experienced religious restrictions to varying degrees throughout their histories. In Hungary, this refers especially to the communist era, and in Turkey, to periods of strict secularism. During the communist era in Hungary (1949–1989), the state implemented systematic atheistic policies that curtailed religious practices and suppressed ecclesiastical institutions. In Turkey, the early Republican period and subsequent decades of "secularism" involved the exclusion of religion from the public sphere through strong state control and legal constraints (Kuru, 2009; Molnár, 2001; Ramet, 1998; Toprak, 1981). This shared experience reveals a common pattern in state-religion relations, consisting of three main stages: government-imposed restrictions on religion, state non-intervention, and selective government support of religious communities. Each phase has had distinct social consequences. While restrictions have often forced individuals to conceal or abandon their religiosity, non-intervention has allowed religions to flourish to their full potential. The final stage, characterized by selective government support, grants certain religious institutions freedom while simultaneously suppressing others, ultimately hindering religious pluralism.

The GREASE Report (Sealy & Modood, 2022) categorizes countries based on their historical backgrounds, asserting that past experiences significantly shape contemporary secularism, religious freedom, and the challenges they face. One such category includes countries with a communist past and an imperial legacy (Christian, Muslim, or multi-

confessional Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and Russian imperial traditions). In these countries, secularism was initially imposed by force before evolving through negotiations regarding religion's place in public and political life.

This historical context provides a rationale for comparing Turkey and Hungary. Hungary experienced some of the most comprehensive forms of enforced secularization, followed by a rapid resurgence of religious activity after the collapse of the USSR (Tomka, 2002; Müller, 2009; Meisenberg, 2011; Stark, 1999; Need & Evans, 2001). Following the regime change, a notable shift toward religion occurred, particularly through the alliance between Fidesz and the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP). This partnership introduced Christian-democratic values into political discourse and policy making. The government emphasized Hungary's Christian heritage in constitutional texts and extended support to officially recognized religious communities (Uitz, 2012; Ádám & Bozóki, 2016). Since 2010, the number of church-operated schools has significantly increased, and Christian institutions have received consistent state support (Népszava, 2020; Faludy, 2022). Similarly, although Turkey was not part of the Soviet bloc, it underwent state-imposed secularization as the first Muslim-majority country to institutionalize secularism. With the electoral victory of the AKP, an Islamic-oriented political party, in 2002, religiosity increased significantly (Toprak, 2005, 2007; Baskan, 2014; Grigoriadis, 2009; Yavuz, 2020; Tuğal, 2016). These shared trajectories make both countries relevant case studies in analyzing religious policies. Furthermore, this study is among the first to conduct a comparative analysis of the past and present religious policies of these two nations. (Yavuz, 2020; Tuğal, 2016).

1.4.1. Turkey

Turkey is the first Muslim-majority country which has made secular ideology clear in its Constitution (Isik, 1998). The Republic of Turkey was founded in 1923, with Mustafa Kemal Atatürk leading a series of political, social, cultural, educational, and economic reforms

aimed at creating a Westernized, modern, and secular nation. Understanding contemporary desecularization efforts requires an examination of Turkey's secularization policies.

The concept of secularization was formally introduced and promoted by Atatürk during the early years of the Turkish Republic, particularly in the 1920s. In 1928, Islam was removed as the state religion, and in 1937, a constitutional amendment officially declared Turkey a secular state. Major legal transformations followed, including the replacement of Islamic Law (Mejelle) with a new Civil Code in 1926 and the transition from the Arabic to the Latin alphabet in 1928.

Education, especially religious education, has been a contentious issue since the republic's establishment (Bayar, 2012; Çakir, Bozan, & Balkan, 2004; Karaman, 1997). The new Republic sought national development through secularization, structuring the education system accordingly and largely excluding religious instruction (Karaman, 1997). With the introduction of *Tevhid-i Tedrisat* (the Law of Unification of Educational Instruction), the pluralistic educational system was abolished, and all schools were centralized under the Ministry of National Education, where religious education was allowed but closely regulated (Çakir et al., 2004). The state aimed to teach a "true version of Islam" through this new educational framework (Bayar, 2012). Traditional madrasas were shut down, and religious subjects were removed from secondary education curricula in 1924 and 1927. All Quran courses were closed (Karaman, 1997; Ozgur, 2012).

To replace madrasas, the government established Imam Hatip Schools (Vocational Religious Schools), which were gradually shut down between 1924 and 1929 (Ozgur, 2012). In the 1930s, these schools were reintroduced to train personnel for religious services, such as leading prayers and conducting funeral ceremonies. In addition to the standard curriculum, students are offered additional fundamental Islamic courses (Morgül, 2016). These schools have since remained a subject of significant debate regarding their role in education and politics

(Çakır, Bozan, & Talu, 2004; Azak, 2012). Their status remained contentious until the rise of the AKP, which expanded their presence and influence.

State-religion relations in Turkey have always been controversial (Pak, 2004). From 1923 until the AKP's victory, successive governments sought to maintain a secular public sphere, where religious symbols and activities were either restricted or placed under state control. The AKP, however, challenged this model, presenting itself as a democratic and conservative alternative. Under its governance, religion became increasingly visible in public life. The desecularization process in Turkey affected both formal and informal education. The AKP introduced regulations lifting restrictions on Imam Hatip School graduates and implemented reforms expanding religious education in public schools. Since 2012, the number of RSs has increased with political support (Butler, 2018). However, while the number of IHLs saw a modest rise of approximately 3% between the 2020-21 and 2023-24 academic years, student enrollment in these institutions experienced a sharp decline of 22% during the same period (National Education Statistics Formal Education, 2020/21-2023/24).

A key institution in Turkey's state-religion relationship is the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, or simply Diyanet), founded in 1924. Its official mandate, as defined by Law No. 633, Article 1, is: "In accordance with the principle of secularism, remaining outside of all political views and opinions, and aiming at national solidarity and unity (Article 136 of the Constitution), to execute the affairs concerning the beliefs, worship, and moral principles of Islam, to enlighten the public on religious matters, and to manage places of worship (Law No. 633, Article 1; Constitution of the Republic of Turkey, Article 136)" (author's translation) (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, 2012). However, scholars argue that the Diyanet has historically served to justify the secular state's hegemony over religion, acting as a state apparatus to control and manage religious activities and education. Its role remains a

subject of academic debate (Gözaydın, 2006; 2008; Tombuş & Aygenç, 2017; Gözaydın & Öztürk, 2014).

The academic literature on Turkey's state-religion relations can be categorized into four main areas: Islamist movements, the visibility of religion in the public sphere (particularly headscarf debates), the secularist-Islamist conflict, and the broader societal impact of secularization. A significant body of research focuses on the emergence and growth of Islamic movements (Gülalp, 2002; Rabasa & Larrabee, 2008), as well as tensions between secularists and Islamists (Kaya, 2012). The radicalization of these movements when they gain political power has also been explored (Akkoyunlu & Öktem, 2016a; 2016b; Kaya, 2015).

Another well-studied topic is the headscarf ban and its effects on women. The debate over the headscarf and its visibility in public spaces has been examined from various perspectives, including legal, political, and gender-based analyses (Göle, 1996; Aktaş, 2006; Çarkoğlu, 2009; Genc & İlhan, 2012; Gürbüz, 2009; Akder, 2010; Gökarıksel, 2009). Some scholars argue that state-enforced secularism created a "counter-elite" (Göle, 1997), whose identity is defined through religious symbols like the headscarf (Sanli, 2005). The visibility of religiosity in the public sphere has been linked to shifts in religious attitudes, with some questioning religion (Sisman, 2000; Evered & Evered, 2016; Ertit, 2018), while others become more religious and intolerant (Yeşilada & Noordijk, 2010; Erişen & Erdoğan, 2018; Kasapoğlu, 2017).

1.4.2. Hungary

The Soviet regime was ideologically opposed to religion and religious activities, leading to the repression of religious practices. While some countries under Soviet control merely discouraged religious expression, others enforced severe restrictions. The response to this pressure varied across regions, resulting in unique state-church relationships that influenced various aspects of life. Politically and economically, these countries followed a

similar trajectory, characterized by show trials targeting both communists and non-communists, suppression of dissent, the presence of an all-knowing secret police, and harsh repression that eventually provoked revolutionary responses. Land reforms and nationalization policies were implemented uniformly, affecting industries and private property. The education system also underwent significant reforms, increasing student enrollment in secondary and tertiary education (Bukowski, Clark, Gáspár & Pető, 2021).

Education in Hungary has deep historical roots, dating back to the early medieval period when it was closely tied to the Church¹ (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2008). In the first half of the 20th century, historical churches played a crucial role in Hungarian society, particularly in education and healthcare. Churches operated approximately two-thirds of elementary schools, with the Roman Catholic Church managing the majority. In addition, Protestant denominations—especially the Reformed (Calvinist) and Lutheran churches—as well as Orthodox communities (for example Serbian and Romanian) also ran significant primary and secondary education institutions before the communist takeover (Pusztai, Bacskai, & Morvai, 2021). They oversaw vocational schools, grammar schools, and teacher training colleges (Szóró, 2019). However, the communist takeover in 1946 severely disrupted both the church-run school system and the churches' organizational structures. Church properties, including schools, were confiscated, and religious orders were banned.

The communist regime sought to overhaul every aspect of society, with a particular emphasis on education. A generation unexposed to religious influences was essential for the regime's ideological goals, leading to the restructuring of the educational system based on communist philosophy. Before 1948, grammar schools were primarily run by churches, but by

¹ "The creation of the Benedictine monastery was followed later by others, Cistercian, Dominican, Franciscan etc., and not only did they... strengthen the new habits and morals of Christian belief... Besides monastery schools, more and more parochial schools appeared in the country as according to the laws of Saint Stephen..." Embassy of Hungary. (n.d.). Short history of Hungarian education system. Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. <https://pristina.mfa.gov.hu/eng/page/short-history-of-hungarian-education-system>

1949, anti-church propaganda had intensified. "Since that time, all church properties have been confiscated, and 67 religious orders... have been dissolved, with monks and nuns imprisoned. Almost 5,000 grammar schools and more than 120 high schools have been taken away from the Catholic and Protestant churches" (Juhasz, 1952, p. 30). The nationalization of church schools (CS) had two major consequences: churches lost their connection with the younger generation and their primary source of income.

A series of restrictive measures followed. On July 9, 1945, numerous church-affiliated social organizations, including youth groups, were banned. By September 1947, the independent Catholic press was repressed. Between 1946 and 1948, the church lost 3,163 out of 3,344 educational institutions, and 600,000 students left RSs. By the 1949-50 academic year, religious education was no longer mandatory. The official separation of church and state was declared on August 18, 1949 (Ramet, 1987).

To further control the churches, financial support was systematically reduced, pressuring religious institutions to comply with state regulations. Cardinal József Mindszenty, the Hungarian Primate, refused to cooperate with the regime and was subsequently imprisoned. Meanwhile, some Catholic clergy collaborated with the state, leading to the establishment of the 'peace priest' movement in 1947. In 1948, the State Office for Church Affairs was created to bring churches under state authority. Churches were forbidden from receiving private donations, further restricting their activities. By the 1950s, most major churches had signed agreements with the authorities, effectively limiting their autonomy. By 1964, "the Hungarian Catholic Church was only a shadow of its former self" (Ramet, 1987, p. 71).

In the 1970s, state-church relations became more cooperative. A significant shift occurred on January 15, 1975, when a new regulation allowed voluntary religious instruction twice a week on church premises (Ramet, 1987, p. 71-72). In the early 1970s, 200,000 copies of the Bible were printed in Hungarian. This softer phase during the Kádár era (circa mid-1960s

to 1970s) saw a gradual relaxation in church-state tensions, culminating in the 1974 agreement that allowed religious instruction in churches—a small but significant opening for church schools (CSs) to operate beyond strict state control (Horváth, 2017). By 1980, secondary schools permitted the study of the Bible as literature. The number of theological students increased from 300 in the 1963-64 academic year to 497 in 1983-84.

During communist rule, the state provided financial support to some clergy, and Catholic and Reformed churches incorporated state propaganda into their teachings, blurring the distinction between church and state and preventing a genuine separation of secular governance from religious institutions. A similar pattern emerged among Protestant churches: by the early 1950s, they had also reached an arrangement acceptable to the communist regime, with newly appointed church leaders willing to collaborate and refraining from challenging the existing political system (Lakatos, 2011). As Froese (2001) observes, such close entanglement meant that secular spheres were never differentiated from religious institutions in this period, leading some scholars to describe communist Hungary as an example of anti-secularization (Tomka, 1991).

The collapse of communism in 1990 brought complete freedom of conscience and religion. One of the first legislative changes, the Church Law (1990, Act IV), guaranteed religious freedom and introduced optional religious education in public schools. Further developments followed after 2010, with the Christian-Conservative government increasing financial and political support for religious institutions. The Public Education and Church Act (2011, Act CCVI) defined the legal conditions under which religious communities could operate, ensuring freedom of conscience, religious education, and parental rights in choosing schools for their children.

Following the fall of communism, churches regained the ability to attract new members, and data indicates a rise in church attendance, with major denominations returning to their pre-

communist sizes (Froese, 2001). The World Values Survey provides evidence of a religious revival in Hungary, with Froese (2001) analyzing data collected between 1981 and 1990. He asserts that "these two points in time fall on either side of the end of communism and the enactment of new laws granting religious freedom and therefore capture the public's initial response to new religious liberty" (p. 257).

Two primary factors contributed to this religious revival. First, state-imposed secularization paradoxically fueled religious resurgence. The communist ideology that religious decline signified the regime's success led many to embrace religion as an act of defiance. Religion thus became a means of individual, communal, and national liberation. Religion played an important role in the collapse of communism but the first responsibility belonged to the Soviet system's attempt to use religion as a tool to build its own ideology. As Michel (2011) noted, "Communism was totalizing everything, including the opposition it aroused. Its collapse detotalizes everything, that is to say that it pluralizes everything" (p. 268).

The second factor was religious pluralization. Increased competition among religious groups led to efforts to expand their influence. The collapse of the Soviet regime initiated a broader religious revival across Eastern Europe. Some scholars explain this phenomenon using supply-side theory, arguing that religious belief thrives in competitive environments (Finke & Stark, 1988; Finke & Iannaccone, 1993; Stark & Iannaccone, 1994; Iannaccone, Finke & Stark, 1997).

However, this unrestricted religious freedom was later curtailed. In 1993, new regulations stipulated that only churches with at least 10,000 followers or a local history of 100 years would be officially recognized (East-West Church & Ministry Report, 1993, in Froese, 2001, p. 260). This led to the exclusion of many foreign religious groups. In 1998, the Catholic Church received \$7.8 million (\$1.7 billion Huf), while the Lutheran and Calvinist Churches each received \$2.96 million (695 million Huf), and the Jewish community received \$390,000

(93 million Huf). By 2016, government financial support for churches had increased significantly, with 171 billion forints (€541 million) allocated for church renovation and parochial school maintenance (Giving Hungarian, 2019, para. 2).

The literature on the state-religion relationship can be categorized under a few main themes, with a significant focus on the communist era. Education under communism, which served as a tool to impose Marxism–Leninism as a form of "state religion," has been extensively discussed by various authors (Horváth, 2017). Pusztai and Inántsý-Pap (2016) further examine the political climate surrounding religious education during communism, including the role of underground church-run schools.

The current state-church relationship in Hungary has also been a subject of scholarly attention. Jobbágy (2015) and Pusztai and Farkas (2019) explore contemporary dynamics, while András (1984) outlines the fundamental characteristics of Hungarian church politics. Schanda (1999) emphasizes that the state should maintain a distance from religious institutions while still appreciating and supporting them. In a later work, Schanda (2001) summarizes the principles of Hungary's state-church relations, stating: "The state should remain neutral in matters concerning ideology; there should be no official ideology, religious or secular" (p. 378).

Mink (2019) critiques the state's regulatory approach to churches, arguing that legislative changes have granted the government control over previously autonomous religious communities. This, he claims, fosters a highly discriminatory environment by favoring certain churches while neglecting others. Zsolnai and Lesznyák (2015) observe that Hungary is undergoing a shift toward greater centralization, though they caution that it is too early to determine whether these changes will ultimately support democratic values. Baer (2014) criticizes Hungary's Act CCVI of 2011, a new law on religion, contending that it provides the government with legal and political leverage to discriminate against religious communities.

Enyedi (2003) adds that even when the legal framework appears neutral, the state often treats churches differently, a disparity he attributes to the dynamics of contemporary politics.

1.5. Conclusion

Both Turkey and Hungary are often described as hybrid regimes, combining electoral competition with centralized authority (Csillag & Szélényi, 2023; Kurrild-Klitgaard, 2019). Understanding this political context provides a useful backdrop for examining how state-supported religious schools influence students' religiosity.

This research aims to explore the state-religion relationship in general and, more specifically, the impact of state-supported RSs on the religiosity of their students. It is a qualitative study that employs various tools to collect and analyze data. To examine religiosity in the mentioned countries, Ninian Smart's Dimensions of Religion will be utilized as a framework. Additionally, Peter Berger's and Vyacheslav Karpov's conceptualizations of secularization and desecularization will be applied to explain the dynamics of the relationship between the state (in this case, Turkey and Hungary) and state-supported religious education.

The following section will introduce the theoretical framework that underpin this study, including secularization theory, supply-side theory, and desecularization theory. These theories will provide the foundation for analyzing the complex interplay between state policies, religious education, and societal religiosity in Turkey and Hungary.

Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework

Theories provide researchers with different lenses to look at complicated social issues and to focus on different aspects of investigated phenomena and the data collected. They offer concepts to summarize, organize, explain, relate, and understand the relationships between concepts (Reeves, Albert, Kuper, & Hodges, 2008).

To understand religious change and the role of states in this change in the modern world, different theories were used. The discussions mainly revolve around two postulates: 1. It is a result of the demand for religion, and 2. It is a result of an abundance in supply. One of these, the secularization theory, which was considered a major theory explaining the change, claims that the decline in religion is an outcome of the decline in the demand for religion due to the modernization of consumers who no longer need supernatural beliefs. On the contrary, the religion market model focuses on the suppliers, not the consumers (Stark & Iannaccone, 1994), asserting that if the supply is provided freely, demand will follow. Desecularization theory, as a relatively new perspective, connects both models by suggesting that both processes can occur in the same society simultaneously at different levels (Karpov, 2010).

The first two studies of this thesis are best characterized as both descriptive and exploratory, aiming not to test predefined hypotheses but to investigate how religion–state relations and the positioning of religious education have been conceptualized and legitimized through key policy documents in Turkey and Hungary. The analysis provided comparative perspectives on the state-religion relationship in both countries. For the third study, Grounded Theory (GT) was utilized, as it aligns with the objectives of the study. In the analysis, categories such as goals, motivations, perceptions, strategies, and expectations of the respondents emerged. Using GT, the participants' views were analyzed, and a theory was developed based on their perspectives. The results derived from the three studies are discussed in light of the

theories mentioned in the following chapter, the theoretical framework. Insights from all three studies are interwoven with the theories in the discussion chapter.

2.1. Secularization Theory

The word secularization simply refers to "the removal of land from religious authority" (Reaves, 2012, p. 11). As Berger noted, the term secularization has had an adventurous history. He defines it as a "process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols" (Berger, 1967, p. 107). By institution, he means the separation of church and state, the expropriation of church lands, and the emancipation of education from ecclesiastical authority.

In terms of culture and symbols, Berger states that secularization is more than a social-structural process. It affects the totality of cultural life and ideation. It may be observed in the decline of religious content in the arts, philosophy, literature, and, most importantly, in the rise of science as an autonomous, thoroughly secular perspective on the world (Berger, 1969). Secularization also has a subjective side. Just as there is a secularization of society and culture, there is also a secularization of consciousness. This means individuals view the world and their own lives without the benefit of religious interpretations (Berger, 1969).

Berger discusses two dimensions of secularization: the first is the socio-structural manifestations of secularization, and the second is the secularization of consciousness. The latter, which can also be called subjective secularization, has its correlation on the social-structural level, which is objective secularization. Based on this correlation, it is not hard to say that there is a dialectical relationship between religion and society. Religious ideas lead to empirically observable changes in the social structure. Similarly, structural changes affect the level of religious consciousness (Berger, 1969).

The secularization theory was widely accepted for much of the twentieth century as an explanation for religious change in societies. Even before it was defined as a theory, the most

prominent social thinkers of the 19th century assumed that religion would gradually fade with modernization, considering theological beliefs, liturgical rituals, and sacred practices as remnants of the past destined to disappear in the modern era (Norris & Inglehart, 2004). C. Wright Mills (1959) asserted that although the world was once full of the sacred in different forms, with modernization, the dominance of the sacred loosened and would disappear from life except in the private sphere. Wallace (1966) argued that secularization is an inevitable result of the increase in scientific knowledge; the question, for him, was whether it was good or bad for humanity.

The religious decline in Europe was explained by the secularization theory. However, when tested in different regions and religions, its validity was questioned. In the last decades of the twentieth century, the theory faced significant criticism. Tocqueville (1956), observing a different socio historical context in the United States, joined the debate with his observations in America, and claimed that the decay in faith was not the reality because "...facts are by no means in accordance with their theory" (p. 339). Peter Berger (1997), once a major supporter of the theory, stated just before the millennium that the theory was "basically wrong" (p. 978). "The world today, with some exceptions...is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever. This means that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labeled 'secularization theory' is essentially mistaken" (Berger, 1999, p. 2).

For Stark and Iannaccone (1994), it is clear that the secularization theory is falsified, and there is no proof that religion is going extinct. In his paper titled "Secularization, R.I.P.," Rodney Stark (1999) claimed that, from the beginning, the theory was never compatible with empirical reality. In a fierce and sustained critique, Stark (1999) suggests it is time to bury the secularization thesis: "After nearly three centuries of utterly failed prophecies and misrepresentations of both present and past, it seems time to carry the secularization doctrine to the graveyard of failed theories, and there to whisper 'requiescat in pace'" (p. 270).

One of the most important pieces of evidence used to criticize the secularization theory is the collapse of the USSR. It demonstrated the failure of the indoctrination of "scientific atheism" in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, despite "a concerted effort to stamp out not merely a religion but all trace of religion" (Greeley, 1994, p. 266).

Statistics from the first decade of the post-communist era led some scholars to expect a continuing religious revival in the former Soviet bloc. By 1990, church attendance had risen in many ex-communist countries. In Hungary, for example, monthly attendance increased from 16 percent in 1981 to 25 percent in 1991, while convinced atheists dropped from 14 to 4 percent. In Russia, the share of non-religious respondents fell from 53 percent in 1991 to 37 percent only five years later (Stark, 1999). These shifts may not only reflect personal belief but also function as cultural resistance and identity reconstruction after authoritarian rule.

Furthermore, Stark (1999) claimed that the theory limited itself to data from only the Christian world. Contrary to those data, the religiosity of Muslims increased with modernization. Research conducted by Tamney (1979) found a positive correlation between education and religiosity, and urbanization did not negatively affect the religiosity of people in Indonesia.

Does this mean that all these scholars of secularization theory were wrong and misinterpreted the evidence? Norris and Inglehart (2004) believe that although the theory needs to be updated, these scholars were not entirely wrong, and the debate on secularization has not yet been settled. The examples considered as disproof of the secularization theory were mainly taken from the US, without collating empirical facts from different countries. Lechner (1991) defends the theory by stating that it "may not be perfect, it is still largely valid" (p. 1116).

Bruce (2001) writes a response to Stark's (1999) paper—titled "Secularization R.I.P."—and titles it "Christianity in Britain, R.I.P." He compares religiosity in Britain in 1851, 1900, and 2000 and concludes that, according to the evidence, there has been a dramatic decline in

the religiosity of the British. He strongly argues that the data he provides shows a growing trend in secularization. He leaves the door open for arguments about the timing and causes of secularization but believes that "organized Christianity in Britain is in serious trouble" (p. 191).

Charles Taylor brings a different perspective to the discussions on secularization. He does not consider belief and unbelief as rival theories. Rather, he focuses his "attention on the different kinds of lived experience involved in understanding your life in one way or the other, on what it's like to live as a believer or an unbeliever" (Taylor, 2007, pp. 4–5). He distinguishes secularity into three senses by referencing religion: "as that which is retreating in public space (1), or as a type of belief and practice which is or is not in regression (2), and as a certain kind of belief or commitment whose conditions in this age are being examined (3)" (p. 15).

Casanova (2007) breaks down the concept of secularization into three core components to discuss it meaningfully: "a) Secularization as the decline of religious beliefs and practices in modern societies, b) Secularization as the privatization of religion, c) Secularization as the differentiation of the secular spheres (state, economy, science)" (p. 7).

In sum, the theory has faced various criticisms. The main objection was that the supposed correlation between modernization and secularization does not hold empirically (Pollack, 2015). Yet Berger argues the theory was not entirely mistaken. Modernity generated a secular discourse, allowing individuals to address many aspects of life without religious references. This discourse exists both in people's minds, as they learn to engage with reality without supernatural assumptions, and in society, where institutions operate similarly (Berger, 2014). For Berger, modern individuals can navigate between secular and religious realities depending on the context (Berger, 2014).

The secularization theory enjoyed being the chief model for much of the 20th century in explaining the place of religion in people's lives. By the end of the century, with the religious decline in post-communist countries, it became a theory in crisis. However, the theory has

regained scholarly interest in recent decades, and many different versions of the theory have been studied.

2.2. Religious Market Model

The second approach, the concept of religious economy, has been developed to elucidate religious movements (Finke & Stark, 1988). According to this theory, similar to commercial economies, there is a religious economy, and different religions or sects compete for their share depending on the degree of regulation in this economy. Finke and Stark divide religious economies into two categories: the first group is unregulated, and the second is regulated by states. The authors suggest that if the market is unregulated, pluralism will emerge. However, due to the nature of religions and their "customers," this market will never be entirely monopolized by states. "Of course, when repression is great, religions competing with the state-sponsored monopoly will be forced to operate underground. But whenever and wherever repression falters, lush pluralism breaks through" (p. 42). By analyzing religious statistics for American cities from 1906, the authors conclude that urbanization and pluralism increase levels of religious mobilization.

The supply-side theory is based on the religious economic market model but provides further clarification. Stark and Iannaccone (1994) define religious firms as "social enterprises whose primary purpose is to create, maintain, and supply religion to some set of individuals" and religious economy as "consisting of all the religious activity going on in any society. Religious economies are like commercial economies in that they consist of a market of current and potential customers, a set of firms seeking to serve that market, and the religious 'product lines' offered by the various firms" (p. 232).

The theory indicates that the state plays an important role in this market, as it has the power to issue rules and regulations governing the market. If a state supports only one religion in the market, these regulations can give that religion an opportunity to monopolize the market.

If regulation is minimal, the market will be pluralistic, meaning the number of firms in the market will increase. Similar to commercial economies, when firms are numerous, they will specialize based on the demands of consumers (Stark & Iannaccone, 1994).

The religious revival in America provided important data to support the supply-side theory. Finke and Iannaccone (1993) assert that the prime mover in religious change in America was a supply shift. "Colonial revivalists, Asian cult leaders, and contemporary televangelists all prospered when regulatory changes gave them freer access to America's religious marketplace," (p. 27) resulting in a rise in religiosity.

This theory has been tested in different countries and has received significant support. Froese (2001) applied it to the Hungarian case as a post-communist country and concluded that the supply-side theory can be used as a theoretical framework to explain religious revival. Moreover, he indicates that this theory also explains the decrease in the religiosity of Hungarians in recent decades due to reduced religious competition and pluralism.

The religious revival in the former Soviet Union was also seen as a result of religious competition and as support for the religious market approach. To measure competition, religious pluralism and religious repression are often taken as indicators. Thus, religious revival after lifting communist regulations on religion supports the market theory (Froese, 2004).

This model is primarily used to explain religious revival in the US and post-communist countries. However, it has faced strong criticism, which can be grouped into two main categories. The first criticism concerns regional selection. Stark (2000) provides data from Nordic and Baltic states. Although these states have religious plurality, there is still a religious decline, leading him to conclude that changes in these countries do not support the supply-side theory. Stolz (2018), by analyzing historical data from Swiss cantons from 1900 to the present, finds that deregulation of the religious market is not necessarily accompanied by the growth of

all suppliers. On the contrary, already established churches become stricter, and non-established churches do not benefit from deregulation.

Secondly, the increase in religiosity is seen as a result of demographic changes due to immigration. Kaufman, Goujon, and Skirbekk (2012) examine religious change in Europe from a different perspective, focusing on the impact of demographic data—fertility and immigration. They conclude that due to these factors, "Western Europe may be more religious at the end of the century than at its beginning" (p. 69). Furseth (2017) researches the religious landscape of Nordic countries and finds a relative decline in Christianity alongside growth in other religions, especially Islam.

In sum, the supply-side theory explains some religious changes in certain regions but is less effective in others. However, the importance of plurality has gained attention through this model.

2.3. Desecularization

Scholars have attempted to explain religious change by focusing on different aspects of the phenomenon. While secularization theory understands it through modernization, the supply-side theory focuses on religious participation. Desecularization, as a concept, was introduced by Peter Berger, who was a determined defender of secularization theory for decades. He admitted that, by the late 1970s, secularization theory had been falsified because it lacked empirical support (Berger, 1992, p. 1) and "was a very Eurocentric enterprise, an extrapolation from the European situation" (Berger, 2012, p. 313). In 1999, he wrote a book titled 'The Desecularization of the World', concluding that the world was becoming intensely religious.

As mentioned earlier, Berger believes that modernization has had some secularizing effects, but it has also had counter-secularizing effects. He notes that "secularization on the societal level is not necessarily linked to secularization on the level of individual

consciousness" (Berger, 1999, p. 3). Although there is a vast body of work on secularization, desecularization is rarely used as a term. Berger defined it as counter-secularization: "the continuing strong presence of religion in the modern world" as a reaction to secularization (Berger, 2015, para. 4). Later, Vyacheslav Karpov (2010) conceptualized the term. It refers to religious growth; however, "escalation of religions' societal influences can be termed desecularization if and only if it develops in reaction to preceding and/or ongoing secularizing trends" (p. 5).

It is important to note that desecularization does not refute secularization theory entirely. Rather, to discuss desecularization, a period of secularization must first occur. Thus, they are not "mutually exclusive. Rather, they tell mutually complementary stories of the complex relationships between religion and society" (Karpov, 2010, p. 7).

Since desecularization is a counter-secularizing process, its components can also be understood as the opposites of secularization components. To articulate these components, Karpov borrows Casanova's view of secularization. Casanova (1994) defines three processes of secularization: "a functional differentiation and emancipation of the secular spheres from the religious sphere," "decline of religion," and "privatization of religion" (pp. 19–20). Karpov defines desecularization as "a process of counter-secularization, through which religion reasserts its societal influence in reaction to previous and/or co-occurring secularizing processes" (Karpov, 2010, p. 250). Thus, it includes "(a) a rapprochement between formerly secularized institutions and religious norms; (b) a resurgence of religious beliefs and practices; and (c) a return of religion to the public sphere" (Karpov, 2010, pp. 239–240). These stages are weakly integrated or not integrated at all. For instance, a rapprochement between secular and religious institutions may not be reflected in people's religiosity. Furthermore, different phases and levels of desecularization and secularization can occur simultaneously in the same place.

To provide a more comprehensive view, Karpov adds two other components to Casanova's model: culture and substratum. *Culture* plays a significant role in the secularization process, as discussed in Berger's (1990/2011) work. The cultural aspect encompasses more than institutional change; in this process, "sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols. ... It affects the totality of cultural life and ideation and may be observed in the decline of religious content in the arts, philosophy, literature, and, most importantly, in the rise of science as an autonomous, thoroughly secular perspective on the world" (p. 107).

Consequently, Karpov (2010, p. 9) argues that counter-secularization does not only mean the return of religion, but also a wider cultural change. Religion begins to appear again in areas like art, philosophy, and literature, while the special authority of science is reduced. In this way, religion regains an important role in shaping and maintaining how people understand the world.

Substratum is another salient component of the processes of secularization and counter-secularization. Most works on the topic discuss religious beliefs and practices, cultural symbolic systems of theology, or the institutional sphere. Karpov (2010) asserts that substratum is often overlooked as "the most crystallized and tangible type of social facts. By virtue of its rigidity, substratum exerts powerful constraints on people's behavior and perceptions, yet at the same time, it can be seen as the ultimate crystallization and materialization of collective representations and institutions. Substrata comprise elements that are 'anatomical' or 'morphological' to societies: population size, distribution and territorial organization, material objects such as buildings and communications, and others. Given the materialistic penchant of much of modern sociology, it is somewhat surprising how rarely analyses of religion's changing societal role have focused on such material indicators" (p. 14).

In many cases, material indicators may be more descriptive than answers collected through surveys. Changes in the substratum of society—from traffic patterns on holy days to the increase in religious-related goods in the market—can be considered signs of desecularization.

Unintegratedness is another hallmark of Karpov's concept of desecularization, and he borrows Sorokin's (1957/1970) theory of cultural dynamics to analyze it. Sorokin focuses on disintegration within and between sensate culture and ideational sociocultural order. Societies fluctuate between an ideational system, which believes in the supernatural, and a sensate culture, which is primarily secular. No sociocultural system is perfectly sensate or ideational; rather, each system encapsulates both to some degree. Building on this, Karpov (2010) discusses the "possible functional interdependencies" of secularization and counter-secularization: "Both types of social change are, in essence, transitions from predominantly (but never fully) religious sociocultural systems to predominantly secular ones, or, in the case of counter-secularization, in the opposite direction" (p. 18).

The consequences of these interdependencies can manifest in various ways. For example, the state's attitude toward religions—whether supportive or hindering—may lead to different effects on mass religiosity, such as believing without belonging or belonging without believing. Additionally, state-supported religious education may result in either religious resurgence or a decline in different social settings. An increase in the visibility of religion in the public sphere may attract youth to the dominant religion or make them resistant to it. "Thus, what on the surface appears as a lack of integration may, in reality, reveal complex latent interdependencies" (Karpov, 2010, p. 19).

Up to this point, the components of desecularization and the relationships between them are discussed. However, the most critical aspect is the Actors involved, as they determine the direction and strength of the process. Berger (1999) suggests that these actors are dissatisfied

with secular elites and revolt against non-religious elites. The marginalization of religious masses by secular elites can be a potential source of desecularization. Karpov (2010) claims that this mass movement requires activist groups and intellectuals to articulate their desires logically. "Thus, conflicts between secularizing and counter-secularizing forces will manifest themselves in clashes between activist groups and intellectuals spearheading these forces" (p. 19). As the decline in religion's role in public institutions reflects the efforts of 'secular activists,' the desecularization of an institution reflects the efforts of desecularizing activists (Lisovskaya & Karpov, 2010).

The direction of these movements plays a crucial role in the process, as well as in this study. Depending on who initiates and leads them, religious resurgence can be described either as "from below"—when driven by grassroots-level groups and ordinary believers—or as "from above," when it is promoted by religious or secular elites (Karpov, 2010, p. 19).

A desecularized society emerges when three conditions are met: large grassroots movements, the organization of these movements, and the provision of resources to the movements. These resources include material and political support. When the movement gains strength, a regime with a desecularization agenda comes to power. This process may differ in scope—ranging from partial reforms in certain cultural or institutional domains to attempts at total religious transformation. It also involves formal and informal institutional arrangements that determine the distribution of power between religious and secular actors and outline the boundaries of their freedoms. Furthermore, these arrangements are supported and justified through specific ideological frameworks (Karpov, 2010).

These dimensions of desecularization can be observed at different levels in different regimes. Some states aim for a completely desecularized society, while others modify or abandon certain dimensions. The intensity of desecularization largely depends on the power balance between secular and counter-secular actors. According to Karpov (2010), these

regimes can generally be categorized into two types: one is a theocratic regime that is exclusive, coercive, and seeks to reshape society entirely based on religious ideology. The other is more liberal and pluralistic, allowing secular authorities to maintain control while selectively pursuing desecularization in specific areas of public life.

Research on the process of desecularization is rare, and scholars have analyzed the concept from different perspectives. Most studies focus on state-church relations, the desecularization of institutions and conflicts, and religious media. Desecularization from above has been analyzed by some scholars, and based on these studies, it can be postulated that it may cause social problems in society.

One of the clearest studies on desecularization was conducted by Lisovskaya and Karpov (2010). They examined the consequences of desecularizing educational institutions in Russia. After theoretical and historical analysis, they concluded that the re-introduction of religious subjects in state schools, initiated by political and religious elites, has inevitably led to tensions between Orthodox and Muslim communities—an outcome closely linked to top-down desecularization in the Russian context.

Kiss (2015) studies the results of desecularization from above in Romania and argues that religion is regaining influence over previously secularized institutions and the political subsystem. Tudor and Bratosin (2018) discuss religious media, which they claim plays a substantial role in shaping Romania's political and cultural spheres.

Marsh (2006) uses the notion of desecularization of conflict to describe the conflict between Russia and Chechnya, arguing that this concept helps explain how religion influences and shapes such political conflicts. Another study by Kippenberg (2009) focuses on the role of religion in conflicts in the Middle East and concludes that peace requires a state capable of upholding the legal order while engaging constructively with religious communities to promote the common good.

Desecularization in Ukrainian politics is studied by Marchenko (2017), who concludes that, although Ukraine is a secular state, religion plays a significant role in legitimizing political authority and fostering national unity. Smrke and Uhan (2012) focus on how the church portrays atheists in Slovenia. They find that the church disseminates unfounded narratives about atheists, which they interpret as a symptom of a shifting relationship between the state and religious institutions in favor of religion.

In Serbia, the connection between church and state has tightened. Blagojević (2006) claims that this represents a process of desecularization in which the church has re-emerged as a central institution in Serbian society, and Orthodox Christianity has taken on a dominant role in shaping national identity and spiritual life. To analyze the desecularization process in Serbia, Blagojević (2008) uses indicators such as granting religious communities the right to register as legal entities, engage in trade, or operate radio and TV stations.

Almost all examples of the theory come from majority non-Muslim countries. Research on desecularization in Muslim countries is scarce. Saeed (2016) conducts a study on the politics of desecularization in Pakistan. She addresses how desecularization affects the religious rights of minorities, specifically the Ahmadiyya community, which does not follow the state's official interpretation of Islam. Saeed (2016) argues that in Pakistan, desecularization has resulted in religious minorities gradually withdrawing from formal political participation, the growing influence of religious parties in shaping state policies, and a political climate marked by both pragmatic and fear-driven responses by authorities to violence against religious minorities.

In sum, the desecularization theory is an effective model, particularly for analyzing religious change triggered by states. It provides a framework for understanding the direction and intensity of the agents driving the change. The main feature that distinguishes this model from others is its prerequisite: a period of secularization must precede it. This is why an increase in religiosity without a prior secularization period is not considered as

desecularization, it is simply a religious growth. On the contrary, desecularization must develop as a reaction to a period of enforced secularization, where alternative worldviews or religious expressions were suppressed (Karpov, 2010).

2.4. Operationalization of Religion

What is religion? One can find more than 2.5 million answers to this question on the internet. It is not because of the simplicity of the question, rather it is due to its complexity. Some of the definitions of religion focus only on one religion. Religion, occasionally, is defined in terms of feeling, and sometimes in terms of conduct or conation. It is hard to find one comprehensive definition which can be applied to all forms of religion. While some definitions emphasize belief in a deity—as in Martineau's understanding of religion as a belief in a divine mind governing the universe—others, like Bellah, focus on symbolic forms and rituals that connect humans to existential realities (Martineau, 1888, in Howerth, 1903; Bellah, 1964). Some definitions are shaped by a particular religious tradition, while others consider emotions, behaviors, or institutional structures. Given this diversity, narrowing religion to a single aspect—be it belief, practice, or organization—would offer only a partial view. Therefore, to grasp the broader societal effects of the politicization of religion, it is essential to adopt a multidimensional perspective that takes into account the interconnected features of religion.

Religion does not have meaning only at the individual level. Therborn (1994) argues that there are two basic ways in which religions can affect this world. "One is through what they say, the other through what they are" (p. 104). The former represents their doctrine or theology, while the latter relates to religion as a social occurrence. It examines how religions are institutionalized, these institutions can be political parties or churches, and the varying degrees to which they are significant in shaping one's identity. For Therborn (1994), it is important to differentiate these various influences, as they tend to function in distinct ways and unfold over different timeframes, even within the same religion defined by theology.

Additionally, it is necessary to clarify the causal mechanisms at play because, in modern times, the influence of religions is typically a result of a combination of multiple causal factors.

This research aims to analyze the impact of the politicization of religion on societies in general. To see this impact, the first study focused on the religiosity of state practices. There are ample studies on state-religion relations, but most of them focus on only one or a few dimensions of religion. Thus, this constitutes a major obstacle to developing a comprehensive understanding of this relationship and its impact on society. Like politics, religion is "a matter of group solidarities and often of inter-group tension and conflict, focusing either on shared or disagreed images of the sacred, or on cultural and class issues" (Haynes, 1997, p. 710). As Therborn (1994) said, even the same religion can act differently and with different temporalities. Moreover, the evaluation of how religion affects politics heavily relies on which aspect of religion is being analyzed and which particular political context is being examined. Overall, it is a challenging task to separate the impact of religion from other causal factors, as religion typically interacts with multiple factors to exert its influence (Haynes, 1997).

In order to understand the religious aspects of the state policies and to have a more complete picture of the state-religion relationship, this study is going to employ Ninian Smart's theory of religion to analyze the data. Rather than giving some definitions of religion, Smart aims to present the theory and practice of religion and find out the common dimensions seen in various religions. He tries to answer this question: What does religious acts mean to the actors? Twenty-five years of study on religious phenomenon reveals to him seven essential dimensions of religions which are: Doctrine/Philosophy, Ritual, Mythic/Narrative, Experiential/Emotional, Ethical/Legal, Social, Material (Smart, 1996).

Smart's dimensional analysis of worldviews was selected as it offers a comprehensive and balanced framework for studying religion. Rather than focusing narrowly on one aspect—such as organization or ethics—his model functions as a 'checklist' to avoid a lopsided

understanding of religion (Smart, 1996). This structure also enables a functional, rather than strictly definitional, delineation of religion, helping scholars to describe religious systems without reducing them to their doctrinal content. Smart's concept of "dialectical phenomenology" underscores the interrelatedness of the dimensions; each element within a religion influences and is influenced by the others, much like parts of an organism (Smart, 1996). This interconnected structure is further clarified by his use of double names for each dimension, which allows both elaboration and flexibility.

The utility of Smart's framework is evidenced by its application across diverse disciplines. Scholars have employed it to explore literature, media, and cultural production—from Shakespeare's religious language (Wong, 2018), Dostoevsky's writings (Jones, 2003), and Judaeon religion (Granerod, 2016), to vampire fiction (Perry, 2010), and Buddhist capital in Australia (Barker, 2007). Others have adapted the dimensions to analyze mass media and marketing (Esch et al., 2013), Swiss television programming (Dahinden et al., 2010), or popular culture (Floyd-Thomas et al., 2016). While some focus on specific dimensions, such as the material aspect used to explore sacred spaces and cultural artifacts like music, dance, and architecture (Cusack & Norman, 2012), the framework consistently offers a flexible yet coherent structure for examining how religion manifests in both traditional and contemporary contexts.

Smart's dimensions will be elaborated in greater detail in the first study, where they are employed as the primary analytical framework.

Chapter Three: Research Design and Methodology

This thesis adopts a qualitative multi-method design comprising three interrelated studies. The first two studies are based on qualitative document analysis, while the third employs expert interviews guided by Grounded Theory (GT) principles. This design allows for an in-depth exploration of the research questions from multiple angles, using diverse yet complementary sources of data. The chapter outlines the rationale for selecting these approaches and briefly introduces the overarching structure of the research. The specific data collection and analysis procedures for each study are discussed in detail in the following sections.

3.1. Methodology for Study 1 and Study 2

3.1.1. Methodological Approach

The methodological orientation of the first two studies in this thesis is best characterised as both descriptive and exploratory in nature. Rather than aiming to test predefined hypotheses or impose a rigid coding structure, the studies sought to investigate how religion–state relations and the positioning of religious education have been conceptualised and legitimised through key policy documents in Turkey and Hungary. These inquiries were guided by two central research questions: What are the dynamics of the relationship between the state and religion in Turkey and Hungary? and What are the key aspects of the interaction between religious schools and the state in Turkey and Hungary?

As Stebbins (2001) notes, exploratory research is particularly useful when addressing under-researched areas and mapping out the key themes that emerge from the data. In parallel, Sandelowski (2000, 2010) highlights that qualitative description allows researchers to stay close to the data while offering an analytically structured yet accessible account of what is happening in a given context.

This approach aligns with Hunter, McCallum, and Howes (2019) emphasis on the value of qualitative inquiry in education policy research, particularly when the aim is not to generalise or predict, but rather to understand how educational phenomena are discursively constructed and politically situated. In this context, the descriptive–exploratory approach enabled a grounded and interpretive engagement with the selected documents, while remaining attentive to broader socio-political dynamics. The decision to adopt this orientation was thus shaped both by the nature of the research questions and the conceptual openness required to explore state–religion interactions in two distinct but historically entangled national contexts.

While this general orientation guided the process, data selection was purposive and informed by an analytical framework derived from the research questions and sensitising concepts identified in the literature. Instead of following a pre-defined coding scheme, these frameworks served as heuristic tools to delineate the boundaries of the inquiry and guide the selection and interpretation of data. They were developed specifically to align with the research aims of each study: Study 1 drew on Ninian Smart's dimensions of religion to explore how religion–state relations were framed, while Study 2 employed a custom framework derived from the literature review on religious education and comparative methodologies. In both cases, the frameworks helped structure the investigation without constraining analytical openness.

Care was taken to include documents representing a range of perspectives within the predefined scope, allowing the process to remain flexible and inclusive. This ensured that the framework provided a guiding structure without restricting the emergence of unanticipated themes or silencing alternative viewpoints.

To address the first research question, Study 1 employed an analytical framework adapted from Ninian Smart's seven dimensions of religion (Smart, 1996). This framework provided a comparative lens through which key discursive and institutional elements of

religion–state relations could be analysed. Smart's dimensions – doctrinal, ritual, mythological, ethical, social/institutional, material, and experiential – offered a structured yet flexible way to examine how religion was invoked, regulated, and instrumentalised in the public sphere across the two contexts. By mapping similarities and contrasts across these dimensions, the study was able to uncover how religious elements were embedded in national narratives, political practices, and state institutions in both countries. The framework helped ensure conceptual clarity while allowing space for emergent insights.

The following table compares the key religious dimensions in Turkey and Hungary from Study 1, summarizing the main similarities and differences based on Smart's framework (see Table 2).

Table 2. *Comparison of Religious Dimensions in Turkey and Hungary (Study 1)*

Dimensions	Turkey	Hungary
Doctrinal	Sunni Islam dominant; government promotes Sunni Islamic discourse	Mixed Christian denominations; Christian identity emphasized politically
Ritual	Religious ceremonies (e.g. mosque attendance) strategically used by leaders (Erdoğan)	Christian rituals (e.g. church attendance) symbolically promoted by Orbán
Mythological	National-religious narratives linked to Turkish identity	National-Christian historical narratives centered on European heritage
Ethical	Piety cultivation aimed by state; moral discourse aligned with Sunni Islam	Emphasis on Christian values for cultural-political cohesion; also influencing social norms and legislation
Social/ Institutional	Strong state control via Diyanet and IHLs; state-funded religious institutions	Pluralist church landscape; state supports Christian institutions selectively
Material	Mosque building and religious infrastructure expansion as political symbols	Restoration of churches and religious architecture as political symbols and national identity markers
Experiential	Politicians leverage religious emotions and rituals for unity; Friday sermons used politically	Religious revival movements (evangelical gatherings); politicized religious expressions

The analytical framework used in Study 2 was developed based on a literature review that focused on two main areas: religious education and methodologies in comparative religious education research. This framework was particularly inspired by Schreiner's (2001) conceptual dimensions, as adapted by Blinkova and Vermeer (2016), and Schweitzer (2006). These scholars emphasized the need to analyze religious education comparatively through both legal and sociocultural lenses. Drawing on these sources, the framework for this study was constructed with the following dimensions:

- Responsibility for Religious Education
 - Legal provisions for RE
 - Contents and aims of RE
- Influence of Religious Institutions/Organizations
- Impacts on RE
 - Political impact / Political discourse
 - Cultural impact / Power of the majority culture

Using this framework, data were collected purposively from a wide range of secondary sources, including legislation, official letters, statistical reports, government publications, academic journals, newspapers, and other relevant documents. This variety of sources also included news articles and academic literature that addressed ongoing developments and contextual nuances. The analysis aimed to illustrate the positioning and functions of RSs in both countries, and to detect broader sociopolitical processes such as desecularization—whether occurring "from above" or "from below," as theorized by Karpov (2010). Ultimately, this framework enabled a structured yet flexible examination of how RSs operate within their national contexts, and how their aims and societal expectations are being met.

3.1.2. Document Analysis

Qualitative research prioritizes understanding how people interpret their experiences and construct meaning of the world around them, rather than relying on statistical generalizations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Within this framework, document analysis aligns well with the interpretivist foundations of qualitative inquiry by providing a systematic method to explore both explicit and latent meanings embedded in textual and visual materials (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Flick, 2018).

Document analysis is a research method involving the review and interpretation of printed or digital documents to uncover meaning and gain insight (Bowen, 2009, Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Rapley, 2007). Unlike data generated through fieldwork, documents—whether textual or visual—exist independently of the researcher's involvement. As Atkinson and Coffey (1997, p. 47) highlight, documents are not neutral artifacts but 'social facts' produced and used within organized social contexts.

These documents can take many forms, including institutional reports, meeting minutes, letters, manuals, newspapers, diaries, applications, public records, or photo albums. Researchers access them through archives, libraries, or organizational files. Documents encompass a broad range of sources—from books and official reports to photographs, videos, and films—and can serve as either primary or supplementary data in qualitative studies (Patton, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). While often used alongside interviews or observations, document analysis can also serve as the sole method where participant access is limited or pre-existing records best reflect research aims (Bowen, 2009).

Document analysis is frequently combined with other qualitative methods to achieve methodological triangulation—defined as using multiple approaches to study the same phenomenon (Denzin, 1970, p. 291). By drawing on diverse data sources such as interviews, observations, or artifacts (Yin, 1994), researchers cross-check findings, enhancing credibility

and reducing bias (Eisner, 1991, p. 110; Patton, 1990). Documents can offer context, support triangulation, and enrich analysis by providing insights that may not emerge from other data sources (Yanow, 2007). When used alongside other methods, predefined codes—such as those from interview transcripts—may be applied to document content to enhance analysis consistency (Bowen, 2009). Moreover, document analysis offers stable, unobtrusive data unaffected by researcher presence or participant dynamics (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Document analysis was selected as the most appropriate method for the first two studies in this research, which explore the dynamics of religion–state relations in Turkey and Hungary (Study 1), and the evolving relationship between the state and RSs (Study 2) in both contexts. Given the focus on developments during the Erdoğan and Orbán administrations—roughly from the early 2000s onwards—document analysis enabled a close reading of how political and institutional actors articulated their positions and shaped discourse over time. Relying solely on interviews would have risked overlooking key elements of how these relations were publicly framed, justified, or contested across different moments. Data collection included a wide range of secondary sources: policy documents, administrative documents, management information systems, economic and social indicators, prior research studies, grey literature, and media outputs such as news reports and policy commentary. These materials were selected for their relevance to the research questions and for their ability to provide insight into policy shifts, political discourse, and institutional practices (Gorard, 2002; Hofferth, 2005; Stewart & Kamins, 1993; Bickman & Rog, 2009). Legal texts, speeches, media articles, statistical reports, and institutional publications functioned as "frozen" representations of official thinking and public discourse, providing a basis to understand contemporary dynamics within their evolving political and ideological context (Bowen, 2009; Poitier, 2024).

In addition to official documents, academic literature and media sources were also analyzed to capture both formal and informal dimensions of the evolving relationship between

religion and state. The inclusion of diverse document types allowed for a more nuanced understanding of how religious education is shaped across different sociopolitical contexts.

Document analysis transcends mere content review by situating documents within the social and political contexts in which they are produced (Prior, 2003). This is particularly crucial for sensitive topics such as state–religion relations, where documents can reveal insights not accessible through interviews alone. Official records, policy documents, media articles, and statistical reports provide perspectives that might be difficult to elicit in direct conversations due to political sensitivities or social desirability biases. Moreover, these documents capture evolving policies, societal changes, and emerging divisions within communities over time, offering a multifaceted understanding of the dynamics at play. In this way, document analysis not only complements interview findings but can also challenge, nuance, or corroborate them, thereby enriching the overall validity and depth of the research.

To ensure rigorous and coherent analysis of the diverse document types collected, this research employed purposive sampling strategies to select information-rich sources relevant to the study aims. The systematic frameworks applied—Ninian Smart's seven dimensions of religion for Study 1 and a customized framework synthesized from prior literature for Study 2 (Schreiner, 2001; Schweitzer, 2006)—guided the targeted selection and coding of documents. This approach facilitated depth and focus in data interpretation, enabling meaningful comparisons across different national and sociopolitical contexts.

3.1.3. Purposive Sampling

Purposive sampling refers to a deliberate, non-random strategy used to identify and select information-rich cases that are most relevant to the research aims (Patton, 2002; Mason, 2002; Robinson, 2014; Trost, 1986). In contrast to probabilistic sampling methods aimed at statistical generalization, purposive sampling prioritizes depth of insight over breadth, making it particularly suitable for qualitative research. This strategy is rooted in the assumption that

certain individuals, groups, or sources may hold distinct perspectives that are essential for understanding the phenomenon under investigation (Campbell et al., 2020). As such, participants or materials are selected based on their relevance, potential for insight, and contribution to analytical saturation (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002).

Nevertheless, purposive sampling may present challenges, especially in capturing sufficient variation when working with predefined frameworks. To address this, researchers carefully establish inclusion criteria aligned with the study's aims, ensuring a comprehensive and relevant dataset without employing iterative sampling strategies (Patton, 2002; Palinkas et al., 2015).

In the context of this research, purposive sampling was applied to the selection of documents in the first two studies. Rather than aiming for statistical representativeness, the selection strategy prioritized documents that could offer meaningful insight into the political, institutional, and educational dimensions of religion–state relations in Turkey and Hungary (Flick, 2009). Following Flick's (2009) distinction between breadth and depth in qualitative document analysis, this study adopted a depth-oriented approach—focusing on a targeted corpus of documents capable of illuminating how state-favoured religious discourses were framed, legitimized, and embedded in educational policy and practice.

Documents were selected based on their expected analytical value and relevance to the research questions, guided by criteria of credibility, thematic relevance, and contextual fit (Sandelowski, 1995; Merriam, 2009; O'Leary, 2017; Prior, 2003; Rapley, 2007). To ensure both relevance and richness of the data, materials were included if they aligned with the conceptual frameworks guiding each study and contained information pertinent to the analytical categories derived from those frameworks. Naturally, the documents covered the years corresponding to the scope of the research. Selection also prioritized accessibility and the capacity to provide relevant insights for each category within the framework. These sources

were particularly valuable for capturing how religion–state dynamics evolved over time and were communicated through formal and informal channels of discourse. Documents were purposively gathered to represent a range of perspectives, including contrasting viewpoints where possible—for example, by cross-checking news reports from multiple outlets or seeking materials that explicitly voiced opposition. This strategy aimed to capture both dominant and contested narratives, thus enhancing the analytical depth and balance of the study.

The collected documents—including academic studies, official reports, political speeches, and media articles—provided critical insights into the religion-politics nexus in Turkey and Hungary. The sampling strategy prioritized information-rich cases tailored to the study's focus on policy implementation and cultural contestation, ensuring depth over breadth (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). These sources helped to understand the main themes and dimensions of religion in both societies. The general structure and examples of the document types for Study 1 and 2 are shown in the table below.

Table 3. *The general structure and examples of the document types for Study 1 and 2.*

Document Type	Usage / Characteristics	Example Sources for Study 1	Example Sources for Study 2
Academic Publications	Theoretical and conceptual works analyzing religion and politics; works by scholars like Smart, Cox, Máté-Tóth	Smart (1969, 1996), Cox (2006), Máté-Tóth (2015, 2020), Ay (2005)	Aşlamacı & Kaymakcan (2017), Genç (2018), Mészáros (2000), Tomka & Zulehner (2000)
Official State Documents	Constitutions, laws, official reports, publications from state institutions (e.g., Presidency of Religious Affairs reports, statistical data)	Turkish Constitution, Hungarian Fundamental Law, TÜİK (2021), Presidency of Religious Affairs reports	2012/28261 Official Gazette, MoNE Vizyon 2023, 1990 Act IV, Church Act (2011)
Political Speeches and Statements	Speeches and declarations by leaders such as Erdoğan and Orbán, election campaigns, official ceremonies	Erdoğan speeches (2013-2023), Orbán statements (2010-2023)	Erdoğan's 2012 IHL speech (İHA), Orbán's 2010 education reform announcements

Media Reports and News Articles	Newspaper, TV, and online news sources; public debates; reports on religion and spatial politics	Reports on mosque and school statistics, HVG (2021), media archives	Hürriyet (2004), Yeni Asya (2016), Telex (MET closures), Budapest Post
Institutional and Educational Statistics	Education statistics, number of schools, official data on religious education institutions	National Education Statistics (2021), Faith-Based Organizations reports	Millî Eğitim İstatistikleri (2021), KSH Yearbooks, Eurydice reports, Diyanet reports, Catholic Pedagogical Institute guidelines
Historical and Cultural Studies	History of religious sites, social impacts, mythology and collective identity studies	Institute of Hungarian Research (2023), Büyüksaraç (2004)	Geertz (1973), Arıcan (2020), Pusztai (2004), Baucal & Zittoun (2013)

3.2. Methodology for Study 3

The third study aimed to explore the impact of religious schools on students' religiosity from the perspectives of experts in the field. The methodological approach for this study is discussed below.

3.2.1. Methodological Approach: Grounded Theory

Grounded Theory (GT) was developed by Glaser and Strauss, who initially applied it to study the experiences of terminally ill patients and their interactions with healthcare staff. During their research, they questioned the suitability of existing methods and introduced the constant comparative method, which became a cornerstone of GT (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). GT is a systematic qualitative research method used to collect and analyze data to develop substantive theories that explain the "hows" and "whys" of social phenomena (Charmaz, 2014). The findings in GT are grounded in the data, particularly in the participants' own words.

Key features of GT include theoretical sampling, theoretical saturation, and the constant comparative method, alongside memo-writing and the abstraction of conceptual ideas, all of which contribute to theory generation (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser &

Strauss, 1967). GT is inherently inductive, as ideas and theories emerge directly from the data rather than being imposed a priori (Charmaz, 2014).

GT offers a rigorous, detailed, and systematic approach to analysis, allowing researchers to develop preliminary hypotheses. It is particularly useful for exploring under-researched topics, as it provides the flexibility to uncover new issues and insights (Bryant, 2002). As Jones and Burgess (2010) note, "Grounded Theory is useful in providing rigorous insight into areas that are relatively unknown by the researcher." (p.142).

Charmaz (2000) expanded on the Straussian approach to GT, introducing the constructivist GT framework. Unlike earlier versions, this approach emphasizes the subjectivity of both the researcher and participants, focusing on the construction of theories rather than their discovery. Constructivist GT acknowledges that theories are not objective truths but are co-constructed through the research process.

A constructivist GT approach involves six key elements:

1. Simultaneous data collection and analysis.
2. Codes constructed from the data rather than derived from pre-existing hypotheses.
3. Continuous comparison at every stage of the research process.
4. Ongoing theory development throughout data collection and analysis.
5. Regular memo-writing to document insights and reflections.
6. Theoretical sampling aimed at theory construction rather than population representation.

The goal of GT is to transform unstructured data into coherent theoretical outcomes. In this study, the unstructured data consists of expert interviews and supplementary sources. GT allows for the use of diverse data collection methods (Charmaz, 2010), and in this research, expert interviews serve as the primary instrument for theory generation. The techniques of GT will be applied to analyze the data collected through these interviews.

3.2.2. Expert Interviews

The expert interview is a unique form of interview designed for specific and limited groups of potential interviewees: experts. According to Döringer (2020), experts are identified based on their specific expertise, community position, or status. Their knowledge extends beyond professional experience (Flick, 2014) to include practical insights on a given topic (Bogner & Menz, 2009). Experts may hold decision-making authority or act as implementers without decision-making power (Wroblewski & Leitner, 2009). Their knowledge can be influential in shaping the conditions of action for other stakeholders (Meuser & Nagel, 2009). However, expert status is not necessarily linked to a high social or professional rank (Petintseva, Faria, & Eski, 2020).

Expert interviews follow a structured, theory-guided process to collect data from individuals with exclusive knowledge (Van Audenhove & Donders, 2019). They serve as a qualitative empirical research method designed to explore expert knowledge (Bogner, Littig, & Menz, 2009). Bogner et al. (2009) identify three types of expert interviews: The exploratory interview aims to acquire as much information as possible rather than comparing data. The systematizing expert interview focuses on knowledge of action and experience, aiming to gather systematic information. The theory-generating interview, on the other hand, seeks to generate theory through the interpretation of interview data.

Given the limited prior research in this field, this study employed a theory-generating approach to develop new theoretical insights rather than testing pre-existing hypotheses. Accordingly, interviewees were selected based on their ability to provide comprehensive information on the political, educational, social, and religious dimensions of the research topic. In line with the principles of GT, a fixed questionnaire was not used; instead, the interviews began with a set of preliminary, open-ended questions that provided an initial framework while leaving space for new themes to emerge during the process. At the outset, this preliminary

guide centered narrowly on whether atheism or deism was present among students in RSs, the potential reasons behind such trends, and whether RSs themselves played a role in this process.

As the fieldwork progressed, additional themes emerged, and the question set was iteratively expanded and refined beyond this initial focus. Over time, the interviews drew on a broader and more flexible pool of questions, generally encompassing the following areas:

- General Understanding of RSs
 - How would you describe the purpose and mission of religious schools?
 - What role do RSs play in society from your perspective?
- Educational Impacts
 - What kinds of religious, academic, social, or spiritual impacts do RSs have on students?
 - Do RSs aim to foster a specific identity among students? If so, how?
- Religiosity and Student Transformation
 - How do RSs influence students' religiosity over time?
 - Have you observed cases of students becoming less religious or atheist after attending RSs? What factors might explain this?
 - How do families' religious expectations compare with students' actual experiences in RSs?
- Political and Governmental Dimensions
 - How have political changes affected RSs' operations or mission?
 - What forms of government support do RSs receive, and why?
 - How does government support influence religious education and student outcomes?
 - What do you think motivates the government's support for RSs?
- Future Prospects

- What challenges or opportunities do you foresee for RSs in the coming years?
- Personal Expertise
 - Based on your professional experience, what key insights about RSs would you highlight for researchers or policymakers?

It should be noted that not all questions were asked in every interview due to the sensitivity of the topic. In some cases, certain questions were deliberately omitted because the interview setting was not conducive to addressing them, or because respondents themselves had already touched on the issue before being prompted. At times, questions were indirectly "overheard" and ignored by the respondent, while in other cases the flow of conversation made them redundant. The process was never uniform: depending on the respondent's position, age, profession, gender, and even personality, the number, order, and formulation of questions varied. New questions also emerged during the process. For instance, in Turkey, the importance of kelam courses was raised spontaneously by the first few participants, leading me to include it as a question in later interviews. In Hungary, early respondents discussed segregation caused by CSs, which then became a question posed to subsequent interviewees. This was a live, dynamic, and iterative process that allowed the refinement and adaptation of questions over time, as suggested by the principles of GT.

3.2.3. Theoretical Sampling

The process of conducting a GT study is not linear but iterative and recursive at every stage. While various sampling techniques can be used in GT, researchers typically begin with purposive sampling to identify participants capable of addressing the research question and providing initial insights into the topic. In this study, I started with purposive sampling to locate interviewees with relevant expertise, and subsequently employed theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) — a method of collecting data aimed at developing theory, where data

gathering, coding, and analysis occur simultaneously, and decisions about whom to interview next are guided by the evolving theoretical framework (Charmaz, 2001, 2015).

Following this approach, I adopted purposive, maximum contrast sampling to capture a wide range of perspectives in an understudied field. Experts were initially defined as academics researching RSs, religious school teachers, and educational bureaucrats or administrators. After conducting online research, I expanded this definition to include individuals who had written books or delivered speeches on religious education and who possessed a significant public or social media presence. In the context of Imam Hatip High Schools (IHLs) in Turkey, this broad definition encompassed civil servants, academics, authors, and IHL teachers and principals from diverse educational, socio-economic, ethnic, ideological, and religious backgrounds. This diversity was crucial to capturing the multifaceted nature of the debate surrounding IHLs. In Hungary, I followed the same initial purposive sampling approach but gradually expanded the sample to include school administrators from various denominations as well as representatives from the Hungarian Atheist Association. This expansion was guided by early interview findings that revealed the relevance of these perspectives to the evolving categories.

The sampling process was iterative and adaptive. I began with a small number of participants, analyzing data after each interview to identify new categories or surprising findings, which then informed the selection of subsequent participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I also asked interviewees for recommendations, specifically seeking experts with differing perspectives to challenge or disconfirm emerging interpretations. Given the multi-dimensional nature of the topic, I continued to conduct targeted internet research to identify new respondents who could provide alternative or contradictory viewpoints. As pivotal new information emerged, the definition of an "expert" was further refined, and new categories were added when necessary.

Recruiting participants proved particularly challenging. Initial outreach to six experts resulted in three rejections without explanation, while others redirected me to colleagues—often through gatekeepers—which slowed the process. I found that direct phone calls were more effective than emails, enabling immediate dialogue and reducing the likelihood of outright refusal. Demonstrating familiarity with respondents' work, such as referencing their publications, also helped establish trust and credibility. Recommendations from trusted colleagues increased the likelihood of participation, yet overcoming the trust barrier remained difficult. Interestingly, the controversial nature of the topic occasionally worked to my advantage, as some experts were eager to participate to defend their views or influence the research narrative.

This process continued until no new categories or insights emerged — the point of theoretical saturation. Conducting the interviews required significant flexibility and reflexivity. I traveled to multiple cities in Turkey, including Istanbul, where I stayed for nearly a month, and made one-day trips to other locations. Most interviews took place in the experts' offices, which provided a quiet and focused environment; only one interview was conducted in a coffee shop. The physical settings, combined with the cultural and political context of Turkey, shaped the dynamics of each conversation. In Hungary, interviews were held in multiple cities, though predominantly in Budapest, with several one-day trips to other locations. In the case of CSs, interviewees often gave me a tour of the premises. During one interview in an empty classroom, we had to relocate when students arrived for the next class. One interview took place in the garden of a coffee shop.

Before data collection, all participants were informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights (voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any stage). Written informed consent was obtained from each participant, confirming their agreement to participate. This study received ethical approval from Szeged University,

Doctoral School of Education, Ethics Committee (Reference Number: 1/2020), ensuring compliance with ethical standards for research involving human subjects. In total, I conducted 18 interviews in Turkey and 11 in Hungary.

In Turkey, many participants requested complete anonymity, asking that no identifying information be disclosed. Some insisted on withholding or altering details such as gender, age, or academic title, and on omitting the city where the interview took place. In Hungary, such requests were rare: one participant asked that the city be omitted, and another that their profession not be disclosed. Consequently, I did not include detailed profile information about respondents in the thesis. Throughout the analysis, I referred to all academics as "professors," those working in religious schools as either "administrators" or "teachers," used the male pronoun for all participants, and refrained from specifying their cities.

3.2.4. Data Analysis

To analyze the data, I used Atlas.ti 7, a software originally designed for GT analysis. It allows researchers to code data, write memos, and visually represent connections between memos and codes through network tools. GT typically employs inductive logic, inferring theoretical concepts from empirical data. Atlas.ti facilitates constant movement between open, axial, and selective coding strategies while allowing for the introduction of new data throughout the analytical process, which is essential for theoretical sampling.

In classic GT, researchers conduct one interview at a time, code and memo, and derive categories. Since GT does not involve pre-determined categories or fixed sampling plans, the next round of sampling is based on the codes and categories developed from the initial data set. This iterative and flexible nature of the GT process also applies to the interview questions. Consistent with theoretical sampling principles, interview questions are not fixed but may be adjusted after each interview depending on the emerging themes and theoretical gaps. Therefore, the questions asked to participants varied slightly throughout the process, as the goal

was to refine concepts and move toward theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

However, the interviews were initially guided by a set of preliminary questions that served as a flexible framework. These questions addressed several themes, including (1) general understanding of RSs, (2) educational impacts, (3) religiosity and student, (4) transformation, (5) political and governmental dimensions, (6) future prospects, (7) personal expertise. This structure allowed for in-depth discussion while leaving room for new topics to emerge organically during the interviews.

Due to time and financial constraints, I was unable to transcribe and analyze each interview immediately. Instead, I took notes on the main categories during the interviews and listened to the audio recordings multiple times before conducting the next interview. This approach helped me identify gaps, uncertainties, and follow-up questions, guiding further data collection. Through constant comparison, I aimed to refine concepts and develop theoretically relevant categories (Timonen, Foley, & Conlon, 2018).

As the number of interviews in GT is not pre-determined, I continued to seek new respondents and conduct interviews until no new information emerged. This was necessary to develop a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. This iterative process of data collection and analysis continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning that additional interviews no longer produced new concepts or insights and the data began to repeat itself. Reaching theoretical saturation ensured a robust and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

3.2.5. Memoing

Memo writing is a crucial analytical process in GT that enhances research quality. Memos serve as reflective and interpretive notes that document the researcher's thought processes, thereby facilitating theory development (Chun Tie, Birks, & Francis, 2019). By

recording evolving ideas, theoretical connections, and personal reflections, memos transform raw data into structured theoretical insights. Memoing also aids in the development of codes into categories, sustaining analytic momentum throughout the research process (Chun Tie, Birks, & Francis, 2019).

In this study, I engaged in memo writing throughout the entire research process, starting from the earliest stages of data collection. Memos were written immediately after interviews and during coding sessions, capturing initial impressions, analytical hunches, and emerging theoretical linkages. I regularly revisited and expanded these memos, using them to refine categories, guide theoretical sampling decisions, and integrate new insights into the developing framework.

3.2.6. Coding

Coding is the analytical process of identifying concepts, similarities, and recurring patterns in data. It serves as the critical link between data collection and theory development (Chun Tie, Birks, & Francis, 2019). GT coding consists of three stages: initial coding, focused coding, and theoretical coding. Coding helps simplify and organize the data, allowing the researcher to compare different parts effectively (Charmaz, 2014). Regardless of the terminology used in different GT approaches, the essential aim during coding is to capture what is taking place within the data. Initial coding involves developing categories of information, focused coding interconnects these categories, and theoretical coding builds a storyline from core codes that connect the categories.

I began with initial coding using data from the first interview. This preliminary step in GT analysis involved fracturing the data into quotations and coding them. I then compared these pieces incident by incident, looking for similarities and differences. I created as many codes as possible and wrote accompanying memos. I labeled important words or sentences and used gerunds whenever possible, as advocated by Glaser (1978) and Charmaz (2006). Gerunds,

or -ing forms, are verbal nouns that imply action and help express a strong sense of action and sequence (Charmaz, 2014). I employed line-by-line coding to stimulate ideas that might not emerge if larger themes were coded. Fracturing the data allowed me to notice details and patterns that might otherwise be overlooked.

This iterative coding process relies on constant comparison, which is central to GT. The purpose of initial coding is to produce useful and usable abstractions (Bryant, 2017), requiring the researcher to stay close to the data, comparing data with data, code with code, and category with category.

After line-by-line coding, I elevated some codes to a higher level and compared them with newly emerging codes. However, categories needed further refinement. Initial coding fractures the data, while focused coding transforms these pieces into more abstract concepts. Focused coding involves "using the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes to sift through and analyze large amounts of data. Focused coding requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense to categorize your data incisively and completely" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 138).

The last phase, theoretical coding, brings together the focused codes to build a coherent theory. This crucial stage allows the final GT to take shape. At this point, the concepts have become abstract categories that summarize many stories into concise, conceptual ideas. The results are shown as interconnected concepts instead of separate themes. Detailed explanations clarify how these categories relate to the main core category (Chun Tie, Birks, & Francis, 2019).

Following this structured approach, coding remained an iterative process, with constant comparison guiding the refinement of concepts. Potential codes and main themes that emerged from the analysis are presented in detail at the beginning of each main analysis chapter. This ensures clarity and allows readers to trace how the data was systematically organized and

interpreted throughout the study. By systematically categorizing and analyzing data, the study aimed to generate a comprehensive theoretical model explaining the dynamics of RSs in their political, educational, social, and religious contexts.

3.3. Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological framework of the study, which evolved from a broad exploration of the state-religion relationship to a focused investigation of the impact of RSs. The research employed two complementary methods—Document Analysis and GT—each playing a distinct yet interconnected role in the study. Document Analysis was used in the first two studies to provide a macro-level understanding of the state-religion relationship, particularly in the context of religious education. This method laid the groundwork for the third study, which utilized GT to delve deeper into the micro-level dynamics and expert perspectives on the topic. Together, these methods enabled a comprehensive exploration, moving from the general to the specific and from the contextual to the experiential.

In the first two studies, Document Analysis provided a foundational understanding by examining policy documents, reports, and archival materials. This method established the historical and institutional context, highlighting key themes, policy shifts, and structural influences. By systematically analyzing these sources, the study identified recurring patterns and gaps in existing knowledge, setting the stage for a more focused empirical investigation.

Building on this groundwork, the third study employed GT to explore expert perspectives in depth. Through interviews, this approach allowed for the emergence of nuanced, sometimes conflicting viewpoints, revealing the complexities of the topic beyond what was evident in the documents. The iterative coding process facilitated the development of theory from data, ensuring that findings were grounded in participants' lived experiences rather than preconceived assumptions.

By integrating these methods in a cumulative and reflexive manner, the research moved from general trends to specific insights, balancing contextual depth with empirical richness. This methodological progression not only enhanced the credibility of the study but also underscored the interconnectedness of historical narratives and contemporary experiences, demonstrating the value of a layered qualitative approach.

One of the key challenges in this methodological progression was ensuring coherence between the different phases of the research. However, this challenge also presented an opportunity to enhance the study's rigor and depth. For example, the contradictions and consistencies between the documentary evidence and interview data often led to new questions and deeper insights, highlighting the dynamic relationship between macro-level structures and micro-level experiences.

In conclusion, the methodological approach of this study reflects a deliberate and strategic progression from the general to the specific. By combining Document Analysis and GT, the research not only addresses the research questions but also contributes to the broader methodological discourse on the integration of qualitative methods in social research. This approach underscores the importance of adaptability, reflexivity, and methodological pluralism, particularly when dealing with complex and multifaceted topics. The combination of these methods has enabled a richer and more nuanced understanding of the research question, offering valuable insights for both academic and practical applications.

Chapter Four: First Study - A Comparison of the State-favored Religions in Turkey and Hungary

This chapter offers a cross-regional and cross-religious comparison of state-religion relations in Turkey and Hungary, exploring how religion functions in constitutionally secular states where its political relevance often challenges the boundaries between public and private spheres. Using Ninian Smart's dimensions of religion as an analytical framework, the study identifies patterns of religious presence embedded in the sociopolitical structures of both countries. Through an exploratory qualitative approach based on open sources—such as news reports, surveys, and official data—the analysis highlights notable similarities in how religion influences the public domain across different cultural contexts. These findings not only underscore the comparative potential of Smart's framework but also invite further research into the role of religion in shaping state practices and public life.

4.1. Dimensions of Religion

The term "religion" or "religious" encompasses a wide range of meanings and interpretations. If the objective is to grasp the societal impact of religion's politicization, it is first necessary to identify the scope and focal points of observation. Concentrating on only one aspect of religion risks presenting a fragmented and incomplete picture. Therefore, a holistic approach that considers all its facets is essential, as an in-depth examination of a single dimension is unlikely to be meaningful without reference to the others.

Rather than offering a fixed definition of religion, Ninian Smart sought to explore its theoretical and practical aspects, identifying recurring elements across diverse religious traditions. He posed a central question: What significance do religious acts hold for those who perform them? In response, he articulated seven key dimensions through which religion can be understood: ritual/practical, ethical/legal, experiential/emotional, material, social/institutional, doctrinal/philosophical, and mythical/narrative (Smart, 1996).

4.1.1. Ritual/Practical Dimension

Rituals are acts that are repetitive and have a standardized form; since they are repetitive, they are also recognizable. They are not about saying something but doing something, and they have symbolic meanings beyond themselves (Stollberg-Rilinger, 2010). According to Smart, all religions display their practical aspects through ritual. Through rituals, the community re-enacts its myths and confirms and expresses its beliefs through action. These rituals can be worshipping, meditation, pilgrimage, sacrifice, sacramental rites, rites of passage, and healing. Ritual is a core feature of religions because it has an intimate connection with all other dimensions.

The ritual dimension is very important in Islam, and it is placed at the core of the religious life of Muslims. Smart gives the five pillars of Islam, which are the profession of faith (the Shahada), daily prayers (salat), almsgiving (zakat), fasting during Ramadan (saum), and pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj), as examples of the ritual dimension. Although all of the pillars play a vital role in the politicization of religion, we would like to give examples from two pillars, the daily prayers and pilgrimage.

Five times a day Muslims turn to Mecca and pray. The prayer has compulsory moves and recitations from the Qur'an and is a way of communicating with the transcendental. It is the essence of the religious life of Muslims since it aims to ensure that Muslims will remain conscious of God (Özcan, 2017).

Praying in the mosque is one of the main rituals in Islam, especially Friday prayer (Friday prayer must be performed collectively, especially by men), which is the most attended prayer in Turkey. The imam, the prayer leader, wears a special garment, and gives a speech before the prayer from a special place (minber) in the mosque. Through the ritual, the imam's status changes and with this new status he advises or preaches to Muslims, as the ritual provides

him with a place above everyday action in terms of clothing and the place where the ritual is staged.

Rituals point beyond themselves, symbolically transcend the present moment, and place it in a larger—possibly a cosmic—context (Stollberg-Rilinger, 2010). When a political leader enters a mosque not as a simple believer but as a leader, the action goes beyond being a simple individual praying and becomes a sign of becoming a leader for all Muslims to protect them. Durkheim emphasized that rituals have a crucial role in social integration and are closely associated with the realm of the sacred (Baringhorst, 2008). Rituals also have a connection with the past "glorious" times in the memory of many people in Turkey. Especially when the leader occupies a special place in the mosque, in the front row, it resembles the Friday divine service parade (*Cuma selamlığı*) in the Ottoman Empire, where the Ottoman sultans were also khalifahs, that is, leaders of all Muslims (*ummah*).

In Turkey, it is very common to see political leaders in the mosques, especially before elections. However, to see the imam welcoming the leader to the mosque is a quite new phenomenon. On 16 February 2019, the newspapers reported that the president of Turkey and AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*-Justice and Development Party) president Recep Tayyip Erdogan went to Bursa for the local elections and entered the mosque for Friday prayers. When he entered the mosque, the imam interrupted his speech and welcomed him by saying: "Our beloved and mighty leader is now in our mosque. We pay our respect to him and pray for him." Erdoğan then prayed in a place that was dedicated to him (*Erdoğan'ı gören imam*, February 16, 2019).

Although politicians often attend prayers in mosques before elections, asking for votes and running a campaign in the mosque have become popular in recent years. As it is a controversial issue, campaigning in the mosques comes to the fore before every election.

The ritual dimension of Hungary's public life can obviously be observed in the celebration of the main national holy days – especially the holiday of 20 August – with the marked presence of Christian symbols and representatives of the main Christian churches. In the political and religious narratives, the existence of the national state of Hungary is closely connected with the decision of the first king, King St. Stephen, for Rome to be recognized as the center of Western Christianity and for the asking and accepting the crown from Pope Sylvester II.

Furthermore, the celebration of Christian liturgical ceremonies on occasion of official national holidays is accompanied by the presence of political representatives in the church buildings during the liturgy, independent from their personal belonging to a particular church. The presence of Christian representatives at national ceremonies and, reciprocally, the presence of political representatives at Christian liturgies emerged after the system change in the years 1989–1991. Since then, these appearances are more characteristic during the administrative periods of right-oriented coalitions. Since the Orbán administration that came to power in 2010, the mentioned mutual appearances have become taken for granted (Bozóki & Ádám, 2016; Bruszt & Stark, 1991).

While Erdoğan is encouraging a mosque-based life, at the same time he has also asked for votes at the opening ceremony of a mosque, declaring: "We have an election after a month. We will make the best of it. We will not leave it to the thieves, God willing!" (Erdoğan cami açılışında May 24, 2019). Imams have sometimes joined the election campaigns of Erdoğan. A video recording of this caused a big reaction because Erdoğan was not only promoting the AKP, but also describing the opposition as infidels and prayed for their failure. He said: "Oh God, give us victory. Protect us from all sorts of harm. Protect the Muslims. This [the coming election, translator's note] is the war between Islam and infidelity; do not give these infidels any opportunity to win" (Bir savcı aranıyor, February 25, 2019).

Especially before elections it is common to witness such speeches that are given mostly by the ruling party members. The places where the main rituals of Islam are performed become stages for political propaganda. Moreover, the prayer leaders sometimes prefer to keep silent, and sometimes side with the politicians, supporting the misuse of those rituals.

Quite similar are the cases concerning public prayer in Hungary. Viktor Orbán, in his first speech after having won his third election with a two-thirds majority, uttered the following prayer: "First of all, we have to say thank God." Furthermore, in Hungary, the national anthem starts with the words, "God bless Hungary." Although taken literally, as a prayer-like formulation, the anthem is understood and chanted as a religion-neutral lyrical text. Nevertheless, the prime minister uses God's blessing formulations in his addresses as an established wording, following the highlighting of his Christian orientation. He also occasionally participates in Christian rituals, such as attending a traditional Epiphany blessing ceremony held at the Carmelite Monastery in early 2025 (Index.hu, 2025).

In her study on the role of ritual in Ancient Maya, Lucero (2003, p. 544) argued that emerging rulers strategically employed various traditional rituals across different settings to acquire and maintain political power. Rituals indeed have the power to integrate religious, social, and political life. This study observes similar patterns in the comparison between Turkey and Hungary, where political actors use rituals to persuade people and even involve them as active participants in their political causes.

Many rituals regularly stimulate strong and persuasive emotions (Rappaport, 1999). The data collected from print and online news suggest that the power of rituals can be an effective tool when political leaders associate themselves with these practices, as such associations with traditional or social conventions lead to the sanctification or uncritical acceptance of their special powers (Lucero, 2003). Politicians in both Turkey and Hungary

appear to seize every opportunity to attend public events and rituals to promote their political agendas, expecting in return to maintain political power.

4.1.2. Ethical/Legal Dimension

A religious tradition offers ethical and legal imperatives that form the core of religious practice. In all religions, there are sets of rules or behavioral guidelines that shape how believers live. Some religions, such as Islam and Judaism, express ethics through legal formulations that prescribe conduct (Cox, 2006), while others emphasize ethical principles shaped and controlled by myth and doctrine. These rules not only define what is considered good or bad within a community but also influence individual behavior depending on the community's overall religiosity. As Smart (1969) noted, to some extent, the code of ethics of the dominant religion exerts control over the entire community. This influence becomes more significant in contexts where religion and state are deeply interconnected, as religious behavioral codes—such as the Ten Commandments in Christianity or more detailed Islamic regulations covering both moral conduct and everyday practices—can also find expression in state laws.

Moral obligations have a vital role in the belief structure of Islam, and Islamic law regulates many issues related to women, family life, inheritance, etc. However, in some traditions, the legal system is less binding, but the concrete society has ethics influenced by doctrine. For Christianity, the center of moral attitude is love: this understanding of love is based on the belief that Jesus sacrificed his own life out of love for people (Smart, 1996). Love means one must love God and love one's neighbors; this was the very center of the teachings of Jesus. For Smart, the concept and the practice of love are rooted in the mystery of the Holy Trinity, "for God from all eternity is a society of three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, kept together by the bond of love" (Smart, 1989, p. 18).

In Hungary, the entire ethical system is rooted in the Jewish-Christian tradition, which is seen not only as a political power and orientation but also as the main source of culture. This

worldview has had a robust tradition in Hungary since its foundation, except for the decades under communism (1950–1990). After communism, this foundation of culture was instrumentalized by all right-oriented governments to highlight clear opposition to the former communist regime and anti-religious political options. Since the Fidesz Magyar Polgári Szövetség and the Keresztény Demokrata Néppárt, (the Hungarian Civic Alliance and the Christian Democratic People's Party, or FIDESZ-KDNP) administration which has been in power since 2010, the importance of Christianity has been emphasized as a core element of political rhetoric and articulated in the new Fundamental Law (promulgated on 18 April 2011), and in the so-called Declaration of National Cooperation (14 June 2010). The preamble of the Fundamental Law contains a "National Avowal" which states: "We are proud that our king Saint Stephen built the Hungarian State on solid ground and made our country a part of Christian Europe one thousand years ago. [...] We recognize the role of Christianity in preserving nationhood" (The Fundamental Law of Hungary, 2011).

In the statements of Orbán, references such as "Christian Hungary" are very common. Orbán regularly emphasizes Christian values as the nation's values, in opposition to liberalism. Although he differentiates Christianity as a religion from Christianity as culture and political orientation, the latter has greater importance for his politics. It signifies the traditional form of the family against the "gender ideology," the Christian heritage of Europe against the Muslim migrants' invasion, and the sovereignty of Hungary against the liberal dictates of the European Union (Máté-Tóth & Kasznár, 2020).

Family and fertility policies belong to the core elements of the FIDESZ-KDNP ideology (Szikra, 2014). They support young families, and, for them, the traditional family is a "political sacrament" which should be defended against "gender ideology" and LGBTQ+ activities (Kováts, 2020). Several supporting programs, including the family home ownership subsidy program, known by the acronym of CSOK, have the aim to increase the low fertility rate.

According to Orbán, Hungary tries to address the need for workers not through supporting immigration, like the Western societies, but through supporting young parents and families. His family policy is one of the most stable fundamentals of his support by the big Christian churches. The strong correlation between the three central values of nation-Christianity-family explains very clearly his political worldview and his constant support from Christians and Christian churches.

Turkey, as the first secular Muslim majority country, adopted the Swiss Civil Code and other Western laws between 1926 and 1929 to westernize the legal system (Feroze, 1962). However, the impact of Islamic rules on Turkish society has not been erased, and religious ethics and rules have continued to be alive in the society.

The AKP has a strong Islamic tradition and draws its primary support from the conservative countryside. Çağaptay (2018, p. 8) argues that Erdoğan has gradually alienated large segments of Turkish society, ultimately narrowing his platform by imposing ultra-conservative and non-egalitarian Islamist social and political values on the rest of the country. Although these values are not explicitly reflected in the constitution, they are frequently promoted by Erdoğan and other AKP members on various occasions.

The promotion of family values and having big families is a good example. Erdoğan insists on families having at least three children to keep the population young (Erdoğan again calls on Turks 20.02.2019). Erdoğan claims that a woman's life was "incomplete" if she failed to have offspring. Almost in every wedding ceremony he attends, he suggests that the couple should have three children. Erdogan has said: "A woman who rejects motherhood [...] however successful her working life is, is deficient, is incomplete." He has called the use of birth control "treason" (Job or No Job, Erdogan Wants, June 06, 2016). For him, a Muslim family should not practice contraception or family planning (Turkish President Recep Tayyip, May 30, 2016). These ideas of the ruling party and its leader have affected the law and, especially with

indications of a decline in the birth ratio by 2012, the long-term policy to encourage at least three children per family was introduced.

Islam emphasizes motherhood, and Erdoğan has publicly stated that "you cannot bring women and men into equal positions [...] that is against nature because their nature is different [...] our religion [Islam] has defined a position for women: motherhood" (McMillan Portillo, 2015). In this framework, women's rights have increasingly been redefined as family rights, shifting the focus away from the individual woman and instead toward her traditional role as a mother and a wife (Çağaptay, 2018). This gendered vision is also reflected in state policy, as seen in Erdoğan's remarks during his premiership supporting the segregation of boys and girls in public dormitories, arguing that "as a conservative democratic government, we have to intervene" to prevent inappropriate situations (Turkish government to act on, May 11, 2013).

In summary, the ethical and moral values of religion, to be more precise, a certain interpretation of Islam based on a certain sect, have an undeniable influence on daily life in Turkey and also on legislation. We can also observe the impact of religion on Hungarian life and legislation with reference to Christian values. In Hungary the politically promoted value system has many overlapping features with Turkey's political rhetoric and legislation.

Moreover, it is important to remark that the Turkish fundamental law is clearly secular and does not mention Islam as a religion or as the main source of the Turkish society's moral system. However, the Hungarian fundamental law is full of references to Christianity, and Christian values are important for the System of National Cooperation (Nemzeti Együttműködés Rendszere or NER). Yet, regardless of the constitution, our analysis indicates that politicians of both countries are not reluctant to refer to religious texts when the texts seem helpful to their political cause.

4.1.3. Experiential/Emotional Dimension

This is one of the most attractive dimensions of religion. When people have encountered something which they believe is very profound, they will react emotionally to it. These emotions are of vital importance, especially when they are related to the events that caused the religion to exist and/or the life of the founder of the religion: "Inspirational experiences helped to shape the careers of Isiah, Paul, Arjuna, Muhammad, the Buddha, and many others in the history of religion" (Smart 1996, 166).

For Smart (1996), so much of religious practice is soaked in emotions that without them, it would become insincere, mechanical, and merely external—not really worth undertaking (p. 195). Emotions can thus be seen as vivifying aspects of rituals. Drawing on examples such as the recitation of the Qur'an and hymns from Christian and Hindu traditions, Smart highlights their powerful emotional impact, noting that the words and music used in rituals create a sense of direct communication with the divine. This emotional depth, he argues, is a vital part of the phenomenology of religion and gives ritual its enduring power (p. 178).

Religious practices evoke deep emotional experiences, and according to Smart (1996), rites trace out a spiritual path through elements such as the call of the minaret, the chanting of sacred scripture, the singing of monks, and hymns, all of which generate feelings that resonate with the numinous and the sense of the divine (pp. 180–181). In Turkey, it is not uncommon to see politicians reciting verses from the Holy Book in mosques before elections, reinforcing the emotional impact of religion in the political sphere (Başkan Erdoğan katıldığı, January 06, 2019). Emotions influence how people perceive politicians and policies, shaping both attitudes and responses (Isbell, 2012). Moreover, they play a critical role in political life by encoding past experiences with evaluative meaning and enabling rapid judgments in new situations (Marcus, 2000, p. 221).

Knowing the powerful effect of religious stories on emotions, Erdoğan ended his speech at the AKP convention by praying the same prayer that the Prophet Muhammad used before the battle of Uhud (Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Oyununuzu 12.08.2018). It was a very emotional prayer. It reminds Muslims of the loss of a battle for the first time in the history of Islam because Muslim soldiers did not follow the orders of the Prophet, and the Prophet Muhammad got injured. By reminding people of this prayer, Erdoğan recalled the knowledge about the Uhud battle and the importance of following the orders of the leader before any war, or election. Furthermore, it was an indirect way of linking the opposition party members and supporters with the enemies of the Prophet.

Many AKP followers believe that Erdoğan is a leader of the Muslim nation, and it is compulsory to obey him. Moreover, besides the ordinary people, some AKP members have also made very emotional statements about Erdoğan. Some prominent AKP members have called Erdoğan the leader of the Muslim nation and even a second Prophet. Some consider touching Erdoğan as worshipping. Last but not least, an AKP deputy has described Erdoğan as a leader who has all the features of God (Erdoğan sevgisinin coştugu, December 02, 2012).

After the regime change in Hungary, right-wing politicians started to appear at the Sunday services of Christian churches. In the first freely elected parliament, a considerable percentage of MPs were regular churchgoers, and there were even Protestant pastors who became MPs. On major national holidays, the Catholic Church holds a solemn service, where several members of the current ruling coalition and the political elite attend, taking their reserved seats in the front rows. After the services, politicians are regularly invited to speak and share their political ideas inside the church or on the square in front of the church, especially during election campaigns. These ritual occasions, often broadcast by government-controlled media, serve to underpin the cooperation between right-wing parties and Christian churches (Walker, 2019; Sata, 2022; Lo Mascolo & Stoeckl, 2024).

During the prime minister's state of the union speeches and other high-profile occasions, Christian bishops are in the front row. What takes place in the sacred space with the presence of politicians during Sunday services, also takes place in the profane space with the presence of religious representatives. This state-church cultural and political coalition has great symbolic power for religious voters who regularly attend church.

Referring to the great past and promising to bring it back and protect the nation are common features of politicians in both Turkey and Hungary. Orbán is often considered as the savior of Hungary from the post-communist and liberal destructive forces, from the international cultural and political influences, from the migrants and Islam, in general from insecurity, by ensuring a confident and powerful Hungary. In his address in celebration of the anniversary of the 1956 October Revolution, Orbán summarized many areas where Hungarians were mentioned as "we":

"We are the ones who in '56 holed world communism below the waterline, and we are the ones who knocked the first brick out of the Berlin Wall. And we are still standing firm. All we say is not that the Hungarians are right, but that they will be right. And because what is right for Hungarians is proved by the third instance, after utility prices and the migrant issue, we will be right for the third time: there will be a referendum, and we will protect our children. Hungary will be the first country in Europe in which we stop aggressive LGBTQ propaganda at the school gates" (Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's commemoration 23.10.2021).

In brief, the most attractive dimension of religion, the experiential one, has attracted a great deal of attention from politicians also. Political leaders often refer to the religious and national rituals and narratives that people would emotionally react to. This emotional experience of people helps the leaders to place it into a collective and historical context and form a collective identity. The image of Orbán as a savior of Hungary or the image of Erdoğan as a leader of all Muslims are good examples of the experiential dimension of religion.

4.1.4. Material Dimension

The material dimension of religion is expressed through the Christian chapels and cathedrals; Muslim mosques; Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, and Jewish temples; and religious icons, paintings, statues, scriptures, books, and pulpits. These physical buildings, paintings, books, and statues are associated with the tradition, geographical places, and narratives of the belief systems.

The material dimension is a reinforcement of ritual, and with that reinforcement of cosmology. The impressiveness of the institution is registered through vestments, relics, jewels, glittering divinities, glorious statues, soaring buildings. In effect the material dimension is both congealed ritual and conceptual hardware (Smart 1996, 288).

Though these places are segregated from the profane world because they are for praying to God, people can gather for different reasons, even for political purposes. They do not serve only for religious ceremonies, but also secular activities can take place there.

In the Ottoman Empire, mosques were mainly built by the people of a particular neighborhood, town, or city, and this tradition has continued in the new Republic of Turkey. However, the discussion about the number of mosques, alongside their function, has never ended. The AKP increased the budget of the Presidency of Religious Affairs and shouldered the financial responsibility for building mosques in Turkey and abroad. According to the Presidency of Religious Affairs, the number of mosques was 79,096 in 2007, and had increased to 89,445 by 2020 (TÜİK merakla beklenen 07.06.2021). Many people criticized this number, arguing that in many cities, mosques outnumbered schools (Hakkari'de okul ve 08.06.2021). According to the Ministry of Education, there are 67,125 schools in Turkey (Şahin .2021).

Since the 1950s, the mosque in Taksim has caused intense discussions among both its advocates and opponents, a challenge for both sides to defend or conquer Istanbul. As Büyüksaraç (2004, p. 1) notes, Taksim Square is a significant Republican landmark in the city,

and central to the dispute were always the political-symbolic implications of the project rather than practical matters like public demand for a mosque. The mosque project was first proposed by a non-governmental organization in 1954, and rejected. In his election campaign, mayoral candidate Erdoğan (now president) promised to build a mosque in Taksim. Most of the opponents of this mosque claimed that it was not an urban project but political (Çelik 2013).

The construction of the mosque started in 2017, and it opened on May 28, 2021. It overshadows the statue of the Turkish Republic's founder Atatürk in Taksim, changing the topography and design of the square (In Istanbul, Erdogan, March 22, 2019). During the opening ceremony, Erdoğan said: "I view Taksim Mosque as a place greeting Hagia Sofia Grand Mosque and a gift for the 568th anniversary of the conquest of Istanbul we will observe tomorrow. [...] Have no doubt that this sound [of adhan] disturbs those who plot against our country. Taksim Mosque is one of the signs of the birth of a great and strong Turkey ..." (Istanbul's Taksim Mosque, May 28, 2021).

Public spaces, especially city squares, are key points where everyday activities overlap with political events. This turns ordinary routines into political acts, effectively shaping city residents as political subjects regardless of their direct participation (Batuman, 2015). Taksim Square, a significant site in the history of the new Republic, functions as a major transportation hub and a popular destination for both Turkish citizens and tourists. The square's ongoing redesign, justified with religious arguments, reveals how secular and Islamist visions clash in their imaginations of Turkish identity and culture.

In Hungary, during the 15 years of Orbán's administration, the large Christian churches have received substantial budgetary support. Although the issue of church funding is extremely complex and cannot be analyzed in detail here, (Schanda 2009, 2019), the government has been extremely generous in providing material support to the churches. Since 2010, 3,000 churches have been renovated and almost 150 have been built with government support in Hungary and

in Hungarian-inhabited parts of the Carpathian Basin. In the autumn of 2021, the Minister of Finance announced that the budget will support church construction and renovation projects on a scale of St. Stephen's (HVG 9. Sep. 2021).

During the reopening ceremony of a church in Budaörs on October 12, 2020, State Secretary Miklós Soltész emphasized that church renovations aim to serve the community irrespective of the municipality's size. This perspective reflects the government's broader approach, which seeks to support church renovation projects as a means to sustain the populations of smaller settlements by revitalizing daily life and preserving both the community and Christianity. According to István Szabó (2021), this renovation program encompasses around 1,400 churches within Hungary and approximately 400 in regions of the former Hungarian territory.

We gave examples only of churches and mosques; however, any ordinary objects or places can symbolize or manifest the sacred. Rosary beads, books, sculptures, the cross, sejjade (prayer rug), or parts of the natural environment can be examples of the material dimension. Our data briefly introduce that there is no clear and sharp line between religion and politics in both Turkey and Hungary in terms of the material dimension. The leaders and politicians of both countries utilize the material dimension of religion, and associate material aspects with the nations' history to gain political goals.

4.1.5. Social/Institutional Dimension

The social dimension of religion refers to how religious traditions are institutionalized and sustained through organized structures and teachings that influence the broader community (Smart, 1969). Even when individuals do not actively follow a tradition, its teachings are preserved and transmitted via institutions such as churches, mosques, and temples. These institutions often include religious specialists—such as imams, priests, rabbis, or shamans—

whose roles and expressions reflect the many forms through which religion manifests in society (Smart, 1996).

Smart found some similarities between the church in Christianity, sangha in Buddhism, and ummah in Islam. Islam, first, organized the state, and then gradually the understanding of ummah appeared. This ummah gathered under the leadership of caliphates, who are the successors of the Prophet (Smart, 1998). Smart (1977) believes that this unifying character of Islam is very important. There are many reasons that Muslims have the idea of unity in their minds and hearts: Muslims have only one holy text, one kiblah (Mecca), they emphasize the oneness of God, and all Muslims follow the same holy laws and traditions.

When it comes to the social and institutional sides of Islam in Turkey, there are three main institutions: the first is Diyanet (the Presidency of Religious Affairs), the second is the Imam Hatip Schools (IHLs), and the last is religious organizations.

With the founding of the Republic of Turkey, Islamic institutions were abolished; however, to address the ongoing demand for religious guidance, the Diyanet was established to oversee matters of belief, worship, and the management of mosques and clergy (Watters, 2018). To train religious leaders, including those responsible for conducting funeral rites, IHLs were opened, offering both secular and religious curricula. In the last two decades, religious organizations have grown significantly in number as well as in political, social, and economic influence. Especially after the AKP's rise to power, religion has become increasingly visible in the public sphere, largely through these institutional channels.

Imam Hatip High Schools have always received generous support from Erdoğan. The number of RSs has increased since 2012, in parallel with political support (Millî Eğitim İstatistikleri, 2021). Public schools have also seen a rise in religious education, with some being converted into IHLs, aligning with Erdoğan's long-stated ambition of raising a pious generation committed to building a new civilization (Butler, 2018). References to this goal appear

frequently in Erdoğan's speeches—sometimes dominating them entirely—as he consistently highlights the symbolic and moral significance of IHLs, equating criticism of these schools with an attack on the nation's roots (Erdoğan: Omuz omuza, 2019). This vision is often encapsulated in the ideal of a young person who carries both modern knowledge and religious values—"a computer in one hand and a Qur'an in the other" (Lüküslü, 2016, p. 637).

Regarding Hungary, Smart's societal dimension can be found in the recognition of churches and religious organizations, the church-maintained school system and faith-based organizations (FBO) in non-governmental organizations (NGO) sector. In Hungary, the biggest Christian denominations with the most members are the Catholic Church (39%), the Calvinist Church (11,6%), the Lutheran Church (2,2%), the Congregation of Faith (0,2%), and the Baptist Church (0,2%). Non-Christian denominations are Jehovah's Witnesses, different Jewish communities, and other communities following Far Eastern and esoteric spiritualities. The question of the official registration of religious institutions was highly debated right from the beginning of the Orbán administration (Schanda 2019; Ádám and Bozóki 2016). According to the criteria of the former law, approximately 350 to 400 religious communities (i. e. traditional churches, denominations, traditional sects, new religious movements etc.) had been registered; the new law (2011) restricted the criteria and less than 40 churches and denominations have been registered. The massive change of the former law demonstrated, on the one hand, the profound Christian orientation of the new government, and on the other hand, the power of the government in the field of religious affairs.

The second area of the social dimension of religion is the educational system maintained by denominations. In Hungary, a remarkable expansion in the takeover of public schools by religious organizations took place and is still taking place. The reasons for the switching of schools from the secular to the religious domain is at least twofold. On the one hand, denominations can provide more financial support for schools, and on the other hand, the

FIDESZ-KDNP government motivates schools to make this change as well. Basically, changing a public school to a church-maintained school has only a low-level effect on the teaching staff and curricula. The change focuses almost solely on the ownership. Debates about this transformation highlighted the problem of freedoms, including the freedom of religion, especially in cases where a town has only one elementary school. Nevertheless, adults and schoolchildren are satisfied with the new situation. Politically, the Orbán government declared the success of this delivery and underlined the importance of church education.

The third area of the social dimension is the increasing presence of faith-based organizations in the field of Hungarian NGOs. In the last 10 years, the government has supported FBOs from the state budget on an extraordinary level FBOs. There is a clear preference for organizations which declare themselves as religious, or declare their activities to have religion- or church-related aims. In general, we can state that the growing presence of FBOs is in the political interests of the government, partly to reduce FBOs related to the former governments and partly to amplify voters in civil society (Máté-Tóth & Szilágyi, 2020).

In summary, the Turkish educational system provides a powerful example of the government's efforts to change the next generation by using religious educational institutions. Furthermore, the presence of the institutional dimension of religion in politics becomes more visible. In the light of the data presented above, we can reach the conclusion that the Hungarian government is expending too much effort in supporting CSs. The societal dimension of religion can be observed in the relationship between the government, on the one hand, and churches, religious organizations, the church-maintained school system, and FBOs, on the other hand. While the aim of the AKP was made clear by Erdoğan, it cannot be ruled out that the FIDESZ government hopes to recruit a generation that thinks and feels differently by making use of CSs. Nevertheless, with or without mentioning the goal, the financial support of both

governments to religious institutions gives us a concrete example of the material dimension of religion in Turkey and Hungary.

4.1.6. Doctrinal/Philosophical and Mythical/Narrative Dimension

Smart believed that all religious and secular belief systems evolve doctrines and philosophy for various reasons. They have a system of doctrines or beliefs about the nature of divinity or ultimate reality and the relationship of humans to that ultimate reality or divinity. These differing doctrines or philosophies are integrated with other aspects of religion because they offer explanation of and justification for the seven dimensions (Smart, 1969).

The doctrinal and narrative dimensions of religion are related to each other, as the first strengthens the second. For example, "in the Christian tradition, the story of Jesus' life and the ritual of the communion service led to attempts to provide an analysis of the nature of the Divine Being which would preserve both the idea of Incarnation (Jesus as God) and the belief in one God. The result was the doctrine of the Trinity, which sees God as three persons in one substance" (Smart, 1992, p. 17).

Myths or narratives are the sacred stories about the invisible or divine world. They tell the stories about the founders or important personalities of religions, and these stories are passed from generation to generation. They reveal and explain the beliefs of that religion about the ultimate nature of gods, humans, and the universe. The story of Adam and Eva and the creation is a good example of this dimension. Moreover, many religious narratives have a connection with other dimensions, such as the ethical, social, economic, and political dimensions.

The doctrinal dimension often manifests itself in politics through stories. Thus, in this section, we will take these two dimensions together to understand the relationship between politics and religion.

To understand the role of myths in contemporary Hungarian society and politics, we need to remember that there is a certain heritage in Central and Eastern European societies, thus also in Hungarian society. The geopolitical and geo-cultural public sphere is at its core (Máté-Tóth and Hajdú, 2017). The societies of these regions have been occupied by great powers for many centuries. In the second half of the 20th century, the Soviet Union was in power. Vulnerability and lack of state autonomy deepened people's desire for autonomy and made the region politically exploitable. It is a kind of collective insecurity and borderline syndrome, which is perhaps the most powerful factor in the construction of collective identity.

Referencing the importance of churches and certain religious myths are closely linked to the emphasis on autonomy and independence (Máté-Tóth 2015). The reference to Christianity and the support given to large Christian churches represent a break with the communist past, an emphasis on independence from vulnerability to communism. In contrast to liberalism, the prominent political support for Christianity can be interpreted as a struggle for autonomy from the EU and the influence of the "powerful" countries of Western Europe (Germany, France, and the UK) (Máté-Tóth and Krasznár, 2020).

The mythical dimension includes references to Hungarians' ancient roots, which is partly reflected in the ideology of alternative religious groups but is also present in the studies and artworks of the government-funded Institute of Hungarian Research, favored by the Ministry of Culture. According to them, Hungarians are a much more ancient people than academic historiography teaches. So much so that alternative historiography traces the origins of Hungarians back to the Parthians. Investigating these origins serves not only historical curiosity but also contributes to the construction of a proud national identity by conveying the idea that Hungarians are a very old and therefore exceptional nation (Institute of Hungarian Research, 2023). The broader framework of these national myths is formed by tales and legends

depicting the prehistory of the Magyar people, the legend of the miraculous deer, the legend of the white horse, etc.

The six doctrines of Islamic faith are reflected in political conceptions, and believing in one God is the key to all: it means believing in the absolute unity of God, who has no partner, is the only creator, and none but Allah (God) is worthy of worship.

There are significant similarities between the qualities of humans and the divine qualities. The names, actions, and qualities that are attributed to God by man are also present in man at a micro level and to a limited extent. Therefore, Allah's attribute of tawhid, the oneness of God, is a general perspective to reality, the world, space and time, the history of humanity, and destiny. It is interpreted as the unity of Muslims on earth, and the theme of protecting the unity and integrity of society in the Muslim political tradition is among the main themes. A close relationship has been established between the concept of tawhid and the concept of ummah, which means the unity of believers and basically has a political meaning. Ummah is one and whole because Allah is also one (Ay, 2005).

Therefore, it was normal to have only one leader in the first periods of Islam. After the Ottoman Empire, the understanding of "one nation, one state" survived in the new Republic of Turkey. Yusuf Akçura, an influential Turkish nationalist, summarized the relationship between religion and nationalism by stating that one of the fundamental tenets of Islam is the idea that "religion and nation are one" (as quoted in Goalwin, 2018, p. 161). Another nationalist author, Ziya Gökalp, emphasized the role of religion in promoting national identity and solidarity (Goalwin, 2018).

Hence, it is not surprising to see a reflection of the concept of "one God, one state" in Erdoğan's statements. He has emphasized the concept of ummah in almost every argument in the first decade of his ruling, and, especially after the 2015 elections, Turkish nationalism. He has re-emphasized one state, one nation, one flag, and one language in addition to his usual

arguments regarding holy figures, God, Islamic martyrdom, the respectability of RSs, headscarves for women, and a personal interpretation of women's place in Islam (Tekinalp, 2018; Burç, 2018).

Narratives help to define groups and sacred entities, as well as persons (Smart 1996). They support doctrines; they are the scripts for rituals and explain the origins of doctrines and rituals. They also depict how God acts when dealing with humanity. Our analysis indicates that finding both dimensions of religion is not too hard in either Turkey or Hungary. While the myths and narratives strengthen collective identity by referring to the ancient roots of Hungarians, the first doctrine of Islam became an important way of producing and protecting the unity and integrity of society in Turkey. The politicians of the two countries have often referred to the myths and doctrines of their religions, especially to create a common history and a united nation.

4.2. Conclusion

This comparative analysis examined a wide range of facts and connections between Turkey and Hungary, enabling the formulation of an evidence-based statement regarding the place and function of religion in both contexts. The sources were collected and examined through a qualitative document analysis, following an exploratory research design, using open sources to identify new concepts and generate generalizations. Ninian Smart's framework of the dimensions of religion was applied to collect, analyze, and extract patterns for each country. The findings suggest that the religious features of Turkey and Hungary are broadly comparable, displaying similarities and differences across each of Smart's dimensions.

Although historical, societal, and religious differences are evident, the main political structures of the two states demonstrate notable parallels. In both cases, political actors employ religion as a means of sustaining and legitimizing political power. Leaders of the dominant political parties hold religious visions, despite the fact that the populations in both countries

exhibit relatively low levels of personal religiosity. Strong efforts are observable in both governments to delineate boundaries between nationalist and religious groups, as well as between institutions aligned with governmental priorities and those opposed to them. In this respect, religion functions less as a reflection of personal piety and more as a favored discursive and ideological tool in the public sphere.

Despite differences in religion and geographic context, the historical trajectories of the religion–state relationship in Turkey and Hungary reveal strikingly similar stages, making them suitable for comparative analysis through Smart's framework. Political leaders in both countries appear fully aware of the role religion can play in maintaining political authority. Rituals emerge as a significant tool in political agendas, with leaders such as Viktor Orbán and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan frequently participating in religious ceremonies and publicly emphasizing their religious orientations.

While Turkey's constitution contains no explicit reference to Islam, and Hungary's Fundamental Law contains extensive references to Christianity, the practical differences between them are limited. Both governments actively promote religion-based value systems. The ethical dimension of religion exerts a notable influence on public life, supported by extensive economic and political backing for religious institutions. In Turkey, this support aligns with the goal of raising a pious generation, whereas in Hungary the objective appears different, though the social/institutional dimension remains visible in governmental actions.

Institutional support extends to the material dimension, as evidenced by the recent increase in mosques, churches, and other religious buildings. Such material expressions of the sacred are used not only for their religious significance but also for their symbolic connections to national history, serving political purposes.

The experiential dimension, with its capacity to evoke strong emotional responses, is strategically employed in both political contexts. Leaders frequently invoke national and

religious narratives or rituals to foster collective identity, justify political decisions, and advance their agendas. Myths contribute to strengthening this collective identity, while doctrines serve to safeguard national unity and integrity.

Overall, all of Smart's dimensions of religion are clearly present in the political life of Turkey and Hungary. Religious symbolism permeates politics and law, and appearances by political leaders in religious spaces are often more politically than personally motivated. The prominence of religion in pro-government media—especially in coverage of events such as the opening of religious institutions or national and religious holidays—further underscores its visibility.

In summary, the comparative analysis of Turkey and Hungary demonstrates that religion—understood through Smart's multidimensional framework—plays a significant and politically relevant role in both contexts. Across all dimensions, religious references and institutions are actively incorporated into political strategies, shaping public discourse and influencing social life. While each country follows its own historical and cultural trajectory, the patterns observed indicate that religion functions less as a matter of private faith and more as an instrument in the political and symbolic spheres. This convergence highlights the enduring capacity of religion to serve as a unifying narrative and a tool of political legitimacy, regardless of differences in tradition or constitutional status.

Chapter Five: Second Study - Schools in the Hands of Religion – Religion-Maintained Schools in Turkey and Hungary

This chapter examines the relationship between state-supported religion and religion-maintained schools (RSs). Building on the first study, which employed Ninian Smart's dimensions of religion to provide a broad overview of state–religion relations, this second study narrows the focus to the institutional dimension, offering a closer analysis of RSs as key sites where states and religion intersect. The aim is to systematically compare RSs in Turkey and Hungary in order to explore how participation in these schools may influence students' religious beliefs and practices.

Like the first study, this research adopts an exploratory, descriptive, and qualitative approach, drawing on data from secondary sources such as official reports, statistical data, newspapers, and academic articles. Given the inherent limitations of comparative studies, the analysis does not attempt to cover every aspect of the two countries' educational systems, but rather concentrates on selected RSs that illustrate significant similarities and differences.

To guide this comparison, the study employs a framework adapted from existing models of comparative religious education, particularly the works of Schreiner (2001), Schweitzer (2006), and Blinkova and Vermeer (2016). This framework provides the analytical basis for examining the two contexts while remaining attentive to the distinct historical, cultural, and social conditions that shape religious education in Turkey and Hungary.

The chapter begins with a brief discussion of qualitative methodologies in comparative research on RSs, followed by an outline of the analytical framework. It then proceeds to a comparative analysis of RSs in the two countries, highlighting both convergences and divergences shaped by their unique trajectories.

5.1. Religious Schools

Religious schools have existed for centuries, as "organized education generally has been religious in nature" (Merry, 2018, p. 1). With the rise of state-sponsored education, national governments have assumed many functions historically carried out by RSs. In many countries, states now provide financial support for RSs alongside general schools — that is, non-religious institutions offering a standard curriculum, whether publicly or privately operated.

The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) guarantee freedom of education, including the operation of RSs. However, increasing religious and cultural diversity has sparked debates regarding their role. These discussions often revolve around public funding, institutional autonomy, the contribution of RSs to social cohesion, and their role in immigrant integration (Maussen & Bader, 2015).

The definition of RSs varies across countries, depending on national contexts (Jackson, 2008; Bråten, 2013). Riley, Marks, and Grace (2003) define RSs as institutions that "focus on instilling religious values and socializing students into a religious identity" (p. 296). Maussen and Bader (2015) define RSs as "all schools that have a distinctive religious character, which plays a role in the way the school operates, for example, with respect to curriculum, admission policies, selection of teaching staff, pedagogy and teaching aids, internal regulations, and so on" (p. 3).

For the purposes of this study, RSs are understood as primary or secondary institutions that integrate both academic and religious studies within a state-recognized curriculum, preparing students for national examinations while providing formal religious education. The term RS is used as an overarching category encompassing both Imam Hatip schools (IHLs) in Turkey and Church Schools (CSs) in Hungary. While IHLs represent a specific type of state-recognized Islamic school, CSs in Hungary refer broadly to church-run institutions affiliated

with various Christian denominations, not only the Catholic Church. Depending on the national context and level of specificity required, the terminology alternates between the general label RS and the more context-specific IHL or CS.

5.2. Comparative Religious Education

Broadly defined, comparative education examines similarities and differences between two or more educational phenomena related to knowledge transmission, skills development, or socialization (Bray & Thomas, 1995). Qualitative comparative education research relies on concepts, contexts, settings, meanings, and descriptions (Fairbrother, 2007).

Within this broader scope, Bråten (2016) defines comparative research in religious education (RE) as the systematic comparison of RE across two or more national educational systems. Similarly, Schweitzer (2009) conceptualizes it as an overarching framework that encompasses various possibilities for comparison in RE. In his earlier and later works (2006, 2009), Schweitzer also stresses the importance of context, arguing that comparisons should take into account the specific educational, cultural, and religious settings in which RE takes place. He warns that comparisons based solely on terms and concepts risk being misleading, since elements that appear similar in two countries may, in fact, differ significantly, and vice versa. For Schweitzer, comparative research is essential precisely because transnational forces influence education in ways that cannot be fully understood within a single national context; studying their impact requires examining how they shape RE across multiple countries.

Comparative studies of RE can help us understand the diversity in different contexts while also recognizing similarities among them. Such studies are becoming increasingly important due to the growing religious diversity in many societies, driven by immigration and globalization. They may also help us better understand other religious traditions (Schröder, 2016).

5.3. Literature Review

Despite the historical role of RSs in the development of educational systems, they have generally been neglected in national and international research (D'Agostino & Carozza, 2019). Existing research has primarily focused on religious education in secular schools and the social and political debates surrounding religion and education. RSs have attracted less academic attention, and much of it is relatively recent (Martínez-Ariño & Teinturier, 2019; Grace, 2003, 2009). However, there are interesting studies that explore RSs from various perspectives to gain a better understanding of their role and impact. Research on how these schools manage religious and cultural diversity, as well as their effectiveness, is expanding (Martínez-Ariño & Teinturier, 2019; D'Agostino & Carozza, 2019). Additionally, there are studies that compare countries with different religions or from different regions of the world (Zehavi, 2008; Künkler & Lerner, 2016; Niemi, 2018; Matemba, 2013; Fontana, 2015; Genç, Ter Avest, & Miedema, 2011; Hendek, 2019).

This literature review is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on studies that examine RSs from various perspectives and categorizes the selected research. The second part analyzes the methodologies used in existing comparative studies of RSs.

5.3.1. Religious Education and Schooling

The scope of this review is limited to comparative research on religious or faith-based schools. The aim is not to review every article about religious education but to focus on studies that employ a comparative approach to investigate RSs across different regions, countries, or religions.

Before delving into comparative studies, it is beneficial to examine what has been discussed in the broader literature on religious education. Previous studies have predominantly focused on single countries or religions, exploring various aspects of RSs. These studies have emphasized the impact of RSs on academic achievement (Sikkink, 2009), the attitudes of their

students toward minorities or marginalized groups (Everett, 2012), their role in promoting social cohesion in pluralistic societies or reducing religious extremism (Martínez-Ariño & Teinturier, 2019), and their financial situations (Flint, 2007). Another aspect that has received attention is the reasons parents choose RSs for their children (Merry, 2018). A few studies have focused on Muslim schooling in Europe (Ferrara, 2017; Ali & Bagley, 2015). However, discussions on RSs are not limited to Europe. There are numerous studies conducted in different countries and continents (Iyer, 2018; Asadullah & Chaudhury, 2009).

There are only a few studies that compare regions with different religions. Most comparative research has evaluated countries with similarities. For example, the REDCo project examined how religions contribute to dialogue in eight European countries (Wiesse, 2010). Bråten (2009) compared England and Norway, while Ryamaz (2013) compared Canada and Australia, two countries with notable similarities. Gleeson, O'Gorman, Goldberg, and O'Neill (2018) compared teachers' views regarding the characteristics of Catholic schools in the USA and Queensland, Australia. A small number of studies have compared Islamic schools in different countries. For instance, Berglund (2019) compared publicly funded Islamic education in Finland and Sweden.

Some studies have compared countries with different religions or from different parts of the world. For example, Zehavi (2008) discussed the reasons for the emergence of faith-based initiatives in the U.S. and Britain, regardless of religion. In their work, Künkler and Lerner (2016) examined state-supported religious education in Indonesia and Israel, focusing on its consequences for civic attitudes. They concluded that the strict separation between secular and RSs in Israel creates a sharp contrast, whereas Indonesia integrates the two systems. Fontana (2015) explored the political role of religious education after violent conflicts, comparing Lebanon, Northern Ireland, and Macedonia. Her findings suggest that religious education often reinforces existing social divisions in deeply divided societies, though this

reinforcement does not necessarily hinder short-term peace and political stability. Similarly, Genç, Ter Avest, and Miedema (2011) compared Turkish and Dutch religious education, examining their historical backgrounds, approaches to RE, the relationship between state and church, and the structure of curricula and textbooks.

Comparative research on RSs remains limited, with most studies focusing on countries with similar contexts and fewer addressing cross-religious or cross-regional comparisons. The reviewed literature highlights both the diversity of approaches and the gaps that remain in understanding RSs across different cultural and political settings.

5.3.2. Methodology in the Literature

This section reviews the methodologies used in existing comparative studies of religious education (RE) and RSs.

Schröder (2016) emphasized that comparative research in RE cannot rely on a single tool suitable for all cases; rather, the methodology must be adapted or developed to meet the specific requirements of each subject and research topic. He also warned that using categories and terms developed in Europe and North America without questioning their applicability risks obscuring local differences and diversity, underscoring the need for categories that are as broad and universal as possible. Schröder identified three groups of categories in comparative religious education: (1) those determining the range of the research, (2) those delimiting the focus of comparison, and (3) those concerning the perspective and focus of the researcher. The first group includes four levels—micro, medium, macro, and meta. The second group covers comparisons of regions/nations, religions/cultures, historical eras, and learning venues and media. The third group addresses how the researcher's own standpoint, priorities, and interpretive lens shape the comparison process.

Freathy, Parker, Schweitzer, and Simojoki (2014) proposed a methodology for their comparative research on the professionalization of RE in England and Germany, which

included the analysis of primary documents. Von Brömssen, Ivkovits, and Nixon (2020) used a critical discourse analysis approach to explore RE curricula in public schools in Austria, Scotland, and Sweden.

Schreiner (2001) provided a schematic overview of the place of RE in school systems. Building on Schreiner's work, Blinkova and Vermeer (2016) used a framework to compare RE in Russia with several European countries. This model has three categories: (1) responsibility for RE, (2) Place of RE in the curriculum and/or educational system, and (3) Content and aims of RE (Blinkova & Vermeer, 2016).

Schweitzer (2006) identified five aspects to examine control over RE. The first is the level of legal provisions for RE, which determines whether governments, churches, or other institutions have authority over RE. The second is the political level, which includes political debates, policies, and party politics. The third is the influence of religious communities on schooling. The fourth is the hidden power of the majority culture, which can be problematic for minorities and immigrants. The fifth is church control over RE at the academic level.

For systematic comparison, Bråten (2015) developed a three-dimension, four-level methodology, combining two different models. The three dimensions are supranational, national, and subnational processes. The four levels of the curriculum are societal, institutional, instructional, and experiential (Bråten, 2013). She argued that all levels of the curriculum exist in any nation (Bråten, 2015).

5.4. Comparison of Religious Schools in Turkey and Hungary

The aim of this section is to delve more deeply into the practice of RSs in Turkey and Hungary. The framework used for studying each country individually and for the comparison is partially derived and modified from the works of Schreiner (2001), as applied in Blinkova and Vermeer (2016), and Schweitzer (2006), based on the reviewed literature.

The framework consists of the following dimensions:

- Responsibility for Religious Education
 - Legal provisions for RE
 - Contents and aims of RE
- Influence of Religious Institutions/Organizations
- Impacts on RE
 - Political impact / Political discourse
 - Cultural impact / Power of the majority culture

Following this framework, secondary sources were analyzed, including legislation, official letters, statistics, government publications, journals, magazines, newspapers, and reports. This investigation will illustrate the positions of RSs in both countries. Additionally, it will indicate the direction of desecularization, as described by Karpov—whether it occurs "from above" or "from below"—if such a process is indeed taking place.

Most importantly, this part of the study will describe the functions of and expectations from RSs in both countries. This description will enable the researcher to analyze whether the aims of RSs are being accomplished, particularly after completing the next phase of the main study.

5.4.1. Responsibility for Religious Education

This section is divided into two parts. The first part examines the legislative provisions for RE to determine whether the law grants control over religious education to governments, churches, or other entities. The second part questions the content and aims of RSs. Does the curriculum aim to raise students as independent individuals or to inculcate a specific identity? Is it integrative or separative? Does it aim to provide education into religion, about religion, or from religion?

5.4.1.1. Legal Provisions for Religious Schools.

Religious schools in Turkey, known as Imam Hatip Liseleri (IHLs), were originally established to train imams and preachers and to institutionalize religious education within the formal system (Tarihçe, Önder, n.d.). Religious education is regulated as a basic right fulfilled by the state for families choosing IHLs (Aşlamacı & Kaymakcan, 2017; Genç, 2018).

IHLs provide secondary education with vocational training while preparing students for higher education (Tanrıkulu & Uçar, 2019). These public schools, managed by the Directorate General for Religious Education under the Ministry of National Education, have university-qualified staff (Official Gazette, 10/7/2018).

Until 2014, there were different types of IHLs, but since then, all have been converted into Anatolian IHLs (DÖGM, 2018). Some of these schools are designated as project schools and admit students through an entrance exam. These IHLs are primarily divided into five types: science and social sciences-intensive IHLs, classical IHLs, visual and modern arts-intensive IHLs, music and sports-intensive IHLs, foreign language-intensive IHLs (Arabic, English, German, Spanish, Russian), IHLs for hafız (Quran memorization) students, and International IHLs.

In Hungary, RSs (church funded/financed schools - CSs) are deeply connected to churches and are a significant component of the educational system, often enjoying high prestige. CSs follow the same curricula as public/state schools for non-religious subjects and use identical educational materials, methods, and content. The primary distinction is that CSs include a mandatory religious education class, which cannot exceed two hours per week. Additionally, CSs "are free to add their special religious courses" (Dronkers & Róbert, 2003, p. 12).

The system change in 1990 marked a radical shift for churches and the entire school system in Hungary. One of the first laws enacted was the Church Law (1990, Act IV), which

guaranteed full freedom of conscience and religion, provided the possibility of practicing them, and introduced optional religious education in public schools (1990, Act IV, 17. §). Act LXXIX of 1993 on public education, in accordance with the Church Law, allowed churches to freely open educational institutions and mandated that public schools ensure the material conditions for religious education.

For the operation of the educational system, all maintainers (municipalities, churches, foundations, etc.) received financial support proportional to the number of students, which could be supplemented by the maintainers from their own resources. In 1997, the Hungarian State and the Apostolic Holy See concluded an agreement that resolved public education funding: the Hungarian State took over the task of granting the municipal surplus (Schanda, 2014), exempting churches from supplementing funding from their own sources. This agreement was later extended to all churches, resulting in church institutions receiving significantly higher budget funding than state-maintained schools since the late 1990s.

Following the foundational legal provisions of the 1990s, church-funded schools in Hungary have undergone significant institutional and organizational development. These schools have modernized their governance structures and embraced professional education management approaches to ensure sustainability and quality. While maintaining full curricular alignment with state standards, they have also strengthened their religious education programs, balancing modern educational demands with faith-based instruction. Additionally, CSs have adapted to demographic challenges, such as population decline and migration, by implementing flexible policies including school mergers and specialized programs. Beyond ecclesiastical bodies, an increasing number of foundations and civil actors have become involved in the management and support of these schools, reflecting a diversification of stakeholders in religious education (Radó, 2021). As a result, Since the 1990s legal reforms, the number of church-funded educational institutions in Hungary has grown sharply (Velkey, G, 2022).

At first glance, both Hungarian and Turkish RSs appear to be controlled by their respective governments, either directly or indirectly. In Turkey, RSs are governed by a unit under the Ministry of National Education (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı- MoNE), and no specific religious institution, such as a mosque or the Presidency of Religious Affairs, holds direct responsibility for their management. In contrast, in Hungary, the church—which historically was fully responsible for education—has now been given the responsibility of maintenance and running the CSs, meaning it oversees both the administration and financing of these schools. Therefore, CSs are an integral part of the educational system through their close connection to the churches, even though the state provides financial support. Governments exert control over RE by permitting newly established units within the MoNE or existing institutions to teach religion and by enforcing regulations on its instruction. To better understand this issue, the aims of RSs and the content they teach to achieve their desired outcomes will be discussed.

5.4.1.2. Contents and Aims of Religious Schools.

5.4.1.2.1. Contents and Aims of IHLs.

The Directorate General for Religious Education (Din Öğretimi Genel Müdürlüğü- DÖGM) explains that International Anatolian Imam Hatip High Schools were established to culturally unite Muslims worldwide and to support religious education before higher education in Muslim-populated countries (International Anatolian Imam, 2019). MoNE highlights IHLs' role in addressing value crises amid social change and their potential to counteract negative associations with Islam, aiming to strengthen their universal character and national model status (2023 Eğitim Vizyonu, 2018).

In line with the aims of these schools, the curriculum of IHLs has been carefully designed. In addition to the standard general high school curriculum, students are offered

additional fundamental Islamic courses². The curriculum consists of approximately 70% secular courses and 30% religious courses. The religious textbooks are based on one sect of Islam, with limited information about other sects and religions. The religious courses include: Quran, Arabic, Tafseer (Quranic exegesis), Hadith (Prophetic traditions), Qalaam (Islamic Theology), Fiqh (Islamic Jurisprudence), Seerah (Prophetic biography), Rhetoric, and Comparative History of Religions. The secular courses cover both social studies and sciences: Literature, History, Geography, Foreign Language, Philosophy, Health Science, Music, Visual Arts, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, and Biology.

Thus, IHLs have created an alternative educational channel alongside general schools by offering both Islamic and secular education. Many families choose IHLs for their children to receive modern education alongside religious training (Gür, 2016). However, these schools face criticism from secular groups who argue that they reproduce religiously shaped cultural capital, fearing that graduates might push for restructuring Turkish society around Islamic ideals, threatening the secular system (Akboga, 2016).

Regarding the interpretation of Islam taught, Aşlamacı and Kaymakcan (2017) explain that IHLs promote a version known as Turkish-Islam, which permeates all religious courses except Comparative History of Religions. This understanding was shaped through interactions of various cultures from Central Asia through Anatolia to Eastern Europe and further shaped by the early Turkish Republic's view of Islam.

Turkish Islam adheres to the Sunni-Hanafi school of thought, and this interpretation has been presented to society through organized religious services rather than civil society. Consequently, the content of teaching in IHLs is determined by the state. Topics incompatible with the political, economic, or legal doctrines of the state are excluded, and only Orthodox

² "...within the scope of National Education Basic Law (dated:1973, no:1739) and The Law (dated:2012, no:6287), the courses on Basic Islamology have been instructed along with science, social science, language, sports, arts and culture courses in our schools". (p. 6, Syllabi Diversity at Anatolian Imam Hatip High Schools, Project Schools. Directorate general for religious teaching)

Sunni Islam is taught. This reflects a state-controlled religious education that promotes the interpretation of Islam supported by the state.

5.4.1.2.2. Contents and Aims of Church Schools in Hungary.

The Hungarian church school system is characterized by the presence of Christian and Israelite maintainers, with fewer than 10 institutions maintained by the latter. There are no Islamic or Buddhist public education institutions in Hungary, despite the presence of diverse religious communities in the country. As a result, Hungarian CSs define their pedagogical goals and religious content based on the Christian value system and education system. Although there are differences between institutions in terms of their specific faith traditions, their basic educational value systems are aligned. Church schools adhere to the centrally binding Hungarian curricula, with subject content, methodology, and tools identical to those of public schools. It is rare for CSs to deviate from non-church curricula and textbooks, except in the case of religious education (since 2021, the Catholic Church has introduced Catholic literature and history textbooks). The curriculum limits religious education to no more than two hours per week, as stipulated by law.

Religious education curricula are church-specific and are used from kindergarten through high school, with content and activities tailored to students' age levels. The content of religious education generally includes the following topics, approached from a church-specific perspective: Bible knowledge, salvation history, church history, ethics, dogmatics, and religion and awareness.

Given the limited time allocated to religious education, CSs also emphasize dormitory life. For schools with dormitories, the Public Education Act allows up to 24 hours per week of dormitory activities, which churches can dedicate entirely to religious education and activities (Public Education Act, 2011). Each church seeks to involve families and congregations in school activities, using regular events (daily devotions, quiet days, worship services, and

congregational visits) to extend educational opportunities (Pusztai, 2020). Research data indicate that the social capital generated by RSs' relationship networks benefits non-RSs as well, as seen in the academic achievements of these institutions. Additionally, CSs provide significant advantages for children of lower-educated parents (Pusztai, 2020). Below, we examine the pedagogical goals of the four largest Christian school maintainers in Hungary.

Catholic Church: The Catholic Church in Hungary has developed a comprehensive educational philosophy that integrates faith with academic learning. This approach reflects the Church's historical tradition of combining spiritual and intellectual formation. Catholic schools emphasize critical thinking and holistic development while maintaining their religious identity. Their curriculum intentionally avoids using secular subjects for religious indoctrination, focusing instead on balanced intellectual and moral education. These institutions maintain close cooperation with families, parishes, and religious communities to support student development. Religious instruction follows ecclesiastical guidelines that are also implemented by Catholic teachers in secular schools. The Catholic framework curriculum maintains alignment with national educational standards while incorporating faith-based components (Catholic Framework Curriculum, Rédly, 1999).

Recent research indicates that this dual focus on faith and academics continues to characterize Catholic education in Hungary. Contemporary studies observe that Catholic schools have adapted their programs to modern educational requirements while preserving their distinctive character. As Pusztai and Engler (2021) demonstrate, these institutions effectively reconcile national educational standards with ecclesiastical objectives, particularly through sustained collaboration with families and local parishes (Pusztai & Engler, 2021, p. 8). This evidence suggests the continued viability of the Catholic education model in Hungary's evolving educational landscape.

Reformed Church: The Reformed Church governs its school system through specific church laws, including the Public Education Act of the Reformed Church (Act V, 2013) and a separate law on religious education (Act VI, 2013). These laws outline the Church's educational goals and the supervisory system for its schools. Reformed schools adhere to national curricula while emphasizing the importance of Scripture in guiding educational practices.

The primary goal of Reformed education is to cultivate students who are not only academically proficient but also deeply rooted in Christian values. The Church aims to nurture individuals who respect universal human values, demonstrate loyalty to the Hungarian nation, and are committed to preserving cultural heritage (Reformed Church of Hungary, n.d). Reformed schools welcome students from various denominations, ensuring that non-Reformed students can practice their faith freely while appreciating Reformed values. Religious education is tailored to different age groups, with practices such as silent days, daily Bible readings, and prayer sessions fostering a gospel-centered atmosphere. These elements combine to create a holistic educational experience (Palotai, Viktor & Ákos, 2019; Reformed Church in Hungary, n.d.).

Evangelical Church: The Evangelical Church's educational goals are defined by Church Law VIII of 2005. Its schools aim to educate students in the evangelical spirit, preparing them to be faithful citizens of Hungary. The Church prioritizes the development of self-conscious, committed members while respecting the religious freedom of students from other denominations (Act VIII of 2005, Article 56).

Evangelical education emphasizes the holistic development of students, integrating emotional, spiritual, and social skills into both religious and secular subjects. Family life, social relationships, and conflict resolution are key components of the curriculum. Religious education follows a structure similar to that of Reformed schools, with additional faith-based activities designed to reinforce Christian values. The Church places a strong emphasis on

community involvement, encouraging families and congregations to actively participate in school life. According to Lutheran principles, the ultimate goal of evangelical education is to teach students Christian liberty and responsibility, fostering critical thinking and a deep sense of moral duty.

According to Kodácsy-Simon, the purpose of education is not to improve man, but the completion of human life in God's reality. The method of education is morality that does not simply mean moralizing, but rather a behaviour pattern for everyday life, which is the characteristic of the whole of the school community. Thus, it is not self-evident for the Church to maintain schools, and ecclesiastical life does not become stronger by the existence of schools, on the contrary, the community should be behind the school. (Kodácsy-Simon, 2015).

Baptist Church: The Baptist Church in Hungary has a distinct focus on serving students with disadvantaged educational backgrounds. This commitment is reflected in the types of schools it maintains, which include many vocational and specialist institutions. The Church's educational mission is closely tied to its charitable work, aiming to provide comprehensive support for students' personal and academic development.

Baptist schools prioritize the cultivation of responsible, Christian-spirited individuals who value honesty and freedom. The educational approach is rooted in love, with the goal of introducing students to the gospel and guiding them toward a relationship with God. Unlike other churches, Baptist schools teach Bible studies instead of traditional religious education. This approach is designed to be more interactive and engaging, focusing on the Bible and God rather than church doctrines or dogmas. The Church believes that this method fosters a deeper understanding of faith and encourages students to develop a personal connection with their spirituality (Public Education Equal Opportunities and Program, 2018: 11).

5.4.2. Influence of Religious Institutions/Organizations

This section examines the influence of religious institutions, organizations, or communities on religious schooling in Turkey and Hungary.

5.4.2.1. IHLs and Religious Institutions/Organizations in Turkey.

To understand the control of religious organizations over RSs in Turkey, it is important to consider the role of the Diyanet. As a former Diyanet president emphasized, analyzing religion and society is incomplete without acknowledging Diyanet's role and functions (Bardakoğlu, 2009).

Established in 1924 as a secular institution, Diyanet operates under the principles of secularism, aiming to promote national unity and avoid political bias (Turkish Constitution, Article 136). Nevertheless, some critics argue that Diyanet functions as a state tool to legitimize religious intervention and to propagate an official interpretation of Islam (Gözaydın, 2014).

There is a longstanding connection between IHLs and Diyanet. Both share the goal of providing reliable religious knowledge, which Diyanet views as essential to combat superstition and misuses of religion (Bardakoğlu, 2009). IHLs deliver religious education centered on the Quran and Sunnah, emphasizing a pure form of Islam under state supervision (MoNE, n.d.). Moreover, many imams working for Diyanet are IHL graduates, and the institution has increasingly become involved in IHL students' education.

Diyanet values IHLs highly and actively supports them. The current Diyanet president has expressed ambitions to increase IHL student numbers significantly, aiming for up to 25% of secondary and high school students to attend these schools (Erbaş, 2020). To enhance this cooperation, Diyanet works closely with the MoNE and theology faculties, organizing regular provincial meetings to improve IHL education quality.

While Diyanet provides significant support to IHLs, the relationship between IHLs and other religious communities, foundations, and non-governmental organizations is more

complex. Turkey is home to numerous religious orders, sects, and foundations, with 30 major religious sects divided into 400 branches and 445 dervish lodges operating openly in Istanbul alone (Tarikat Erasmus'u, 2018). Some of these groups operate informally, while others are registered as associations or foundations. According to official statistics, religious service organizations rank third (18,525) after professional and sports associations (Derneklerin Faaliyet Alanlarına, n.d.).

Islamist civil society organizations have developed close ties with the state during the AKP governments, benefiting from government support (Sunar, 2018). Some organizations are included in official protocol lists and enjoy tax exemptions (Ayas, 2018). In return, these organizations have declared their support for IHLs, offering scholarships and social and cultural support for successful graduates. MoNE has also launched campaigns to prepare IHL students for university entrance exams, with religious organizations providing financial support for summer and winter camps (Tarikatlardan İmam Hatip kampanyası, 2018; Bakanlık, belediye, hayırsever, 2019). For example, the Erenköy Cemaati has promoted IHLs in Africa (Güner, 2021). Outside of school, IHL students receive religious education from various sources, including religious sects (18.6%), religious courses (22.3%), families (42.6%), religious broadcasting institutions (10.9%), and associations (7.8%) (Aksu, 2017).

However, not all Islamic groups support IHLs. Some argue that these schools were established by the state for specific purposes and do not trust them, believing that IHLs distort religion. They advocate for religious education initiated by free and civil enterprises rather than state-controlled institutions (Yıldırım, 2015). Critics claim that IHLs are a "trap for Muslims to damage Islam" (Sertkaya, 2015) and serve as a "backyard of a party and politics," producing militants for a political ideology under the guise of piety (Bu zulümler bitene, 29 Ağustos 2017). A prominent religious preacher, Cübbeli Ahmet, has even argued that İHL graduates

are becoming deists or atheists due to the schools' inefficiency (İmam hatiplerden ateist, 17.01.2020).

5.4.2.2. Church Schools and Religious Institutions/Organizations in Hungary.

In Hungary, RSs were a central part of the education system until the mid-20th century. The communist regime's rise to power in 1946 dealt a severe blow to both the church school system and the organizational structure of churches. Church assets, including schools, were nationalized, and the operation of religious orders was banned.

Following the political changes of 1989, Hungary embarked on a comprehensive transformation of its education system. The end of communist rule brought a shift from a centrally controlled, ideology-driven curriculum toward a more democratic and pluralistic framework (Education in Hungary, 2008). The 1993 Act on Public Education was a cornerstone, supporting parental rights to choose religious or secular education and prohibiting ideological bias in state schools. This act also emphasized democratic principles, equal opportunity, and restricted political indoctrination in classrooms.

Decentralization became a key feature of the system, balancing national regulation through the National Core Curriculum (NCC) with local autonomy in curricular development. Although memories of central control lingered, a multi-level regulation emerged to guide schools while allowing flexibility (Halász, 2007). The NCC, first introduced in 1995, has evolved to include broader educational goals, such as national identity, environmental education, and the development of key competences aligned with European standards.

Moreover, political developments continued to influence education, notably after Hungary's accession to the European Union in 2004, which accelerated reforms aligned with democratic governance and market economy principles. Local governance laws introduced in 1990 transferred significant educational responsibilities to public authorities, fostering

decentralized decision-making and shared responsibility in public education ((Dancs & Fülöp, 2020; Marusynets & Király, 2020)

.A significant shift in ecclesiastical education occurred after 2010, when the Christian-Conservative government came to power, leading to increased political and economic support for churches. This support enabled churches to maintain and expand their schools more effectively than in previous years. The operation of ecclesiastical schools is primarily regulated by the Public Education Act and the Church Act (Act 2011. CCVI.). While the Public Education Act governs the overall framework of public education, the Church Act defines education as one of the public ecclesiastical activities, with general rules for church operations also influencing educational practices.

The Church Act serves as the cornerstone for the functioning and social involvement of Hungarian churches. It not only defines religion and outlines the conditions under which religious communities may operate but also guarantees freedom of conscience and religion (1.§, 7.§) and grants parents exclusive rights over their children's moral, ideological, and religious education (2.§). Furthermore, the law ensures the exercise of freedom of conscience and religion in all educational, childcare, health, and social institutions. This means that all schools, not just church-run institutions, are required to offer ethics or religious education based on parental choice, as mandated by the national curriculum for grades 1–8.

The Public Education Act further stipulates that state-owned institutions must offer optional religious education chosen by students (46 § (e)). Churches, as school maintainers, are allowed to diverge from certain standards applicable to state-run institutions. For example, they may require students and employees to belong to a specific church, introduce religious obligations and behavioral rules, and deviate from state regulations regarding student numbers, textbooks, and curricula. Churches also have the right to establish institutional councils for public schools, ensuring their representation regardless of the school's affiliation.

The Church Act enables the state to conclude comprehensive agreements with churches to support their public, social, and educational activities. Churches can take over educational tasks from the state without limitation and enjoy exemptions from financial and tax burdens. For instance, services related to religious life, education, health, and social care are tax-free (Church Act, 22. § (2)). These provisions have made the operation of the ecclesiastical school system more predictable and transparent, leading to the transfer of state-maintained schools to churches (Lengyel, 2016).

In 1997, the Hungarian Bishops' Conference established the Catholic Pedagogical Institute³ to coordinate the operation and professional activities of Catholic schools. The institute's primary responsibilities include professional counseling, subject guidance, pedagogical information, educational administration services, teacher training and development, organization of academic and talent competitions, pedagogical evaluation, and student counseling. The institute operates under the full supervision of the Hungarian Catholic Bishops' Conference (MKPK), which exercises control primarily through its exclusive right to appoint the institute's director.

Similarly, the Reformed Pedagogical Institute⁴, founded by the Synod of the Reformed Church of Hungary in 1994, supports pedagogical work in kindergartens and schools. Its tasks include preparing professional recommendations, compiling lists of teaching materials and experts, coordinating competitions, and developing faith education. The institute also organizes training courses, publishes textbooks and journals, and develops curricula. Like its Catholic counterpart, the Reformed Church holds the exclusive right to appoint the institute's director.

While these specialized institutions oversee pedagogical work, the legal and economic maintenance of schools falls under the responsibility of dioceses. In addition to diocesan

³ <https://www.katped.hu/>

⁴ <http://refpedi.hu/>

schools, religious orders in Hungary also operate kindergartens, elementary schools, and secondary schools. Each major religious order has established institutions to coordinate educational activities. According to 2021 data, there are 169 diocesan kindergartens, 223 diocesan elementary schools, and 60 diocesan secondary schools, alongside 24 kindergartens, 33 elementary schools, and 39 secondary schools run by religious orders (Catholic Pedagogical Institute, n.d.). These numbers have grown significantly by 2024: approximately 457 church-run kindergartens, 640 church-run primary schools, and 210 church-run upper secondary general schools nationwide (Eurydice, 2024; Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2022.).

Church-run schools adhere to the same national curriculum as state and foundation schools. However, their religious character is maintained through compulsory religious education (two classes per week) and extracurricular activities. Most schools observe major religious holidays, hold religious services, and incorporate prayers at the beginning and end of classes. Students also participate in annual retreats lasting several days, and schools maintain close ties with local parishes.

In Hungary, civil society organizations, mainly foundations, support CSs through fundraising activities such as school balls. Although these foundations are registered under the law on associations (Hungarian Parliament, 2011, Act CLXXV of 2011), they primarily assist school management rather than operate as independent entities. As such, they do not qualify as NGOs or FBOs in the international sense (Máté-Tóth & Szilágyi, 2020).

5.4.3. Impacts on Religious Education

The third aspect examined in this study is how the role of RSs in the educational system is debated and decided, and how these discussions have affected RSs in the given society. This section is divided into two sub-levels: the first focuses on the effects of political debates on the position of RSs, while the second explores the influence of the majority culture's hidden power

on these schools. Given the scope of this paper, a comprehensive historical analysis is not feasible; therefore, the focus is primarily on the last few decades.

5.4.3.1. Political Questions on Religious Education.

5.4.3.1.1. *In Turkey.*

It has been argued that those in power have historically used religion and religious education for their political and ideological interests (Turan, 2019). To assess whether political control over religious education exists, Schweitzer (2006) suggests examining political debates on the subject. The status of IHLs has fluctuated throughout history due to societal and political influences. The state's stance on religion has significantly shaped the existence and structure of IHLs. Although RSs have existed in Turkey for centuries and IHLs for nearly a century, this section focuses on political discussions since the AKP came to power in 2002.

The controversy surrounding IHLs has revolved around two main perspectives. Secularists opposed IHLs, arguing that their graduates were being educated to undermine the founding principles of the Republic (Özgür, 2012). Conversely, supporters of IHLs contended that lifting restrictions was necessary to eliminate discrimination (Rabasa & Larrabee, 2008). This conflict primarily manifested in debates over religious symbols and rituals (Akyüz, 2016). When AKP assumed power, the middle school level of IHLs had been closed, and graduates faced entry restrictions to universities. Since many AKP leaders, including Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, were IHL alumni, expectations for policy changes emerged. However, significant modifications were not implemented until 2012 (Genç, 2018).

Rabasa and Larrabee (2008) observed that policymakers on both sides acknowledged the transformative potential of educational reforms, particularly the gradual societal impact of integrating IHL graduates into state institutions. During its initial term, the AKP adopted a measured approach toward IHLs. Karaman (2001), a prominent theologian aligned with the party, criticized the politicization of IHL debates, contending that partisan rhetoric stifled

reform efforts. The AKP initially avoided direct engagement with IHL-related grievances, though it attempted incremental changes—such as the 2004 bill to abolish the coefficient factor⁵ (katsayı faktörü), a discriminatory coefficient limiting IHL graduates' university access. The proposal was vetoed by President Sezer, who framed it as a threat to secular reforms (Hürriyet, 28.05.2004). Support for the status quo came from figures like Higher Education Council's (YÖK) Kemal Gürüz, who argued that IHLs prioritized religious dogma over critical thinking (Gönenç & Kontacı, 2005; Özgür, 2012). Facing backlash, the AKP retracted the bill, with Erdoğan dismissing further action as politically untenable (Memurlar.net, 02.06.2004).

The AKP's approach to IHL reforms evolved in three distinct phases. The initial phase focused on securing university access for IHL graduates—a process delayed by secularist resistance for nearly a decade. Following the eventual removal of restrictions, Erdoğan publicly challenged the justification for the previous policies during the 2012-2013 academic year opening ceremony. He criticized the longstanding opposition by questioning whether IHLs had produced harmful outcomes, such as fostering anarchism or terrorism, or if they had instead cultivated patriotic youth dedicated to serving the nation (İHA, 17.09.2012).

The second phase commenced with the 2012 adoption of the 4+4+4 education system, which restructured compulsory schooling into three tiers (Official Gazette, 2012/28261). This reform revived middle school-level IHLs, offering families the choice between general and vocational tracks—including religious education. Critics, however, contended that early religious specialization risked undue parental influence over children's ideological development (Altinyelken et al., 2015; Bermek, 2019). The MoNE defended the policy as a flexible framework to nurture individual potential (MEB, 2012), while AKP deputy Ali Boğa openly framed it as a pathway to expand IHLs (Hürriyet, 24.08.2012).

⁵ The YÖK applied the coefficient factor to the results of the university entrance exams.

The third phase involved converting general schools into IHLs. Schools with better infrastructure and resources were transformed into IHLs, sparking protests, petitions, and public forums. In May 2014, MoNE notified schools of impending conversions, prompting backlash from parents and educators. In July 2014, a Coordination group was formed by parents, students, educators, lawyers, and psychologists concerned about these changes. They criticized administrative actions such as "Removing of coeducation gradually in basic education, turning the venues that separated for science, art and culture into IHL classrooms with the project of "school within school", financially supporting the converted schools while not supporting others..." (Zeytinlioğlu, 2016, p. 51-52). Following the backlash, the conversion letter was withdrawn in September 2014. However, school conversions persisted, leading to an increase in IHLs while general high schools declined. Eğitim-Sen (2016) argued that this trend reflected the AKP's prioritization of IHLs, with its president Aytekin stating that despite low enrollment rates in many IHLs, the government continued to open new ones.

The academic effectiveness of IHLs has been contested in scholarly discourse. Studies indicate these institutions underperform compared to mainstream public schools despite receiving considerable institutional support (Genç, 2018, p. 9; Çelik et al., 2018). As İnal (2004) emphasizes, educational content and infrastructure transcend pedagogical concerns, representing intersections of state power, civil society, and political ideology. Under AKP governance, religious education has experienced unprecedented growth – statistically evident in the expansion from 1,672 IHL high schools to 3,427 middle schools by 2021 (Millî Eğitim İstatistikleri, 2021). This institutional proliferation included both new constructions and the conversion of 1,477 secular schools into IHLs by 2018. Financial allocations further demonstrate this priority, with IHLs receiving 23% of total education budgets (\$1.68 billion) while educating just 11% of secondary students (Genç, 2018).

5.4.3.1.2. In Hungary.

To gain a clear and nuanced understanding of the political and social discourse surrounding CSs in Hungary, it is necessary to examine the period before and immediately after the regime change in 1990. During the communist era, which was itself not uniform between 1950 and 1990, there were only eight Catholic grammar schools under church management, with no primary or vocational schools. However, before 1950, a significant portion of public education in Hungary was provided by the schools of major churches (Mészáros, 2000), encompassing all levels of education (Nagy, 2012).

The 1990 regime change brought school-related issues to the forefront, particularly for right-wing political forces, which strongly advocated for the reintegration of churches into the public education system. At that time, the political elite sought to transform the highly centralized education system of the party-state era, aiming to increase the autonomy of schools and teachers in terms of both funding and operation. However, the methods for achieving this goal became a subject of intense political debate between left- and right-wing parties (Balogh, 2018).

In political rhetoric, it was frequently asserted that the legitimacy of the regime change depended significantly on the restoration of CSs that had been confiscated during the forced nationalization of 1948-1950 (Tomka, 1994). The return of these schools to their original church maintainers was framed as a form of reparation. However, liberal and left-wing political forces were critical of this process, emphasizing the need to guarantee ideological pluralism, especially in municipalities where only one primary school existed. If this single school was transferred to church management, it could limit ideological diversity and parental choice, effectively compelling non-religious families to enroll their children in a church-run institution.

A new phase of this political discourse emerged with the rise of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's administration after 2010. The Orbán government actively supported the transfer of

municipal schools to church authorities, even when these schools had never previously been under church management (Rosta, 2012). This shift was not framed as a rectification of past injustices but rather as a deliberate policy of de-secularizing the school system. According to the Statistical Yearbook of Public Education and the Central Statistical Office, the number of church-run schools has doubled over the last 8-10 years. In the 2010/2011 school year, churches operated 197 primary schools and 108 secondary schools. By 2019, these numbers had increased to 378 and 172, respectively (Központi Statisztikai Hivatal [KSH], n.d.).

However, the growing number of church-run schools was not solely a result of government policy. Many schools themselves petitioned local dioceses to take over their administration due to financial difficulties. A key factor behind these management challenges was the gradual reduction of municipal funding, particularly the loss of additional normative aid. In contrast, church-run schools continued to receive both the standard state grant and an additional ecclesiastical grant (Oktatási Hivatal [OH], n.d.). While CSs are not legally guaranteed eligibility for this additional funding, it is ensured through cooperation agreements between the churches and the government (Schanda, 2019).

The political and public debate surrounding church-run schools has flared up twice—once immediately following the regime change and again during the Orbán government's tenure. Although the arguments in these debates follow similar patterns, scholars note that this controversy increasingly reflects a broader struggle over the role of religion in Hungary's political project. The churchification of Hungary's education system has been interpreted as part of a strategic alliance between authoritarian populism and religious actors, in which the state outsources education to politically loyal churches while reinforcing a Christian-nationalist identity (Neumann, 2024). Denominational schools have thus come to function as selective, better-resourced institutions, further marginalizing underprivileged students in underfunded state schools.

While most major churches have aligned with the government's ideological agenda, smaller or dissenting denominations have faced systemic repression. The Hungarian Evangelical Fellowship (MET)—a small Methodist denomination known for social services and its refusal to adopt nationalist rhetoric—has seen several schools forcibly closed or transferred to state control, often on disputed financial grounds (Faludy, 2024). Critics view these measures as politically motivated, contrasting sharply with state support for ideologically loyal churches and raising concerns about violations of religious freedom under both domestic and European human rights law.

These dynamics have contributed to a stratified education system in which elite and church-run schools increasingly cater to higher-status students, while marginalized groups, such as Roma and low-income children, remain concentrated in underfunded state institutions (Budapest Post, n.d.). Supporters frame these transfers as preserving Hungary's Christian heritage or addressing financial shortfalls, whereas critics argue they entrench a caste-like hierarchy within the school system, reflecting a wider illiberal turn in governance.

5.4.3.2. The Hidden Power of the Majority Culture.

5.4.3.2.1. In Turkey.

The hidden power exerted by the majority culture on RSs constitutes the second aspect of their role within the educational system. The debates about IHLs are not confined to the political level; the majority culture also exerts a significant influence on RSs. Schweitzer (2006) acknowledges that the hidden power of the encompassing culture can exert control over religious education.

To understand the connections between religion and culture, Clifford Geertz's approach will be very useful. Geertz (1973) describes religion as a system of symbols that serves as a cultural model and a source of information essential for shaping social and psychological processes. Furthermore, as a system of symbols, religion establishes moods and motivations

by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence. It provides a foundation for human identity: "It is a virtual reality ... or kind of a "contact lens" by means of the man perceives all the reality" (Wolny, 2012, p. 33).

Both culture and religion function as symbolic systems that express humankind's quest for meaning. According to Geertz, religion is a cultural system, and through its symbols, ideas, rituals, and customs, its influence permeates all aspects of society. Religion and culture are integrative expressions of meaning. Religion as a cultural system "includes specific others, objects, texts of reference, values and norms, authorities, and practices" (Baucal & Zittoun, 2013, p. 211). Moreover, culture is increasingly becoming a crucial issue in politics.

Turkey, as a Muslim-majority country, reflects the visible influence of religion in its culture. Perhaps the most illustrative example of this influence on IHLs is encapsulated in the term "İmam Hatipli," which refers to a person who has graduated from an IHL and is immersed in its cultural identity. As Arıcan (2020) notes, IHLs are not merely educational institutions within the conservative and religious segments of society; they are ascribed a special membership value and a privileged status. This has led to an institutional identity distinct from other educational institutions, where the lifestyle, political attitude, and level of religiosity of an "İmam Hatipli" become integral to this identity.

The identity of being an "İmam Hatipli" comes with many expectations, which directly or indirectly shape RSs. IHLs are tasked with raising a generation that will safeguard the nation (Ayhan, 2014). Their success in meeting the expectations of religious communities has made them influential (Gökçati, 2005). The majority perceives IHL students as individuals with high moral values who respect religious and national traditions (Özensel, Akın & Aydemir, 2012). Families regard IHLs as safe environments and send their children there for protection, believing that religious education acts as a safeguard in an untrustworthy world (Çınar, 2018).

Due to this trust, parents play a decisive role in students' choice of IHLs (Emiroğlu, 2016; Korkmaz, 2013; Şatır, 2019; Çınar, 2018; Sarı, 2021). The primary reason for parents' preference for IHLs is religious education (Dündar, 2008; Özdemir & Karateke, 2018; Yurtsever, 2019). IHLs appeal to parents as they offer both academic and moral education, emphasizing character development and societal values (Aslanargun, Kılıç & Bozkurt, 2014, p. 145). The religious majority hopes that IHLs will reinforce the idea that religion should play a substantial role in individuals' lives and society, ultimately contributing to a more Islamic Turkey (Junaedi, 2016, p. 121).

IHL students perceive themselves as distinct from students of other schools, particularly regarding morality. Kanburoğlu (2018) argues that this distinction does not stem from IHL students seeing themselves as different but from their desire to be different. This differentiation is not based on personal experiences but rather on the identity ascribed to them through discourse. The concept of collective identity is prominent among IHL graduates, many of whom openly identify as "İmam Hatipli" (Çakır, Bozan & Talu, 2004). They acknowledge that this identity entails responsibility and discipline, which they attribute to their education. Many believe that being an "İmam Hatipli" grants them high prestige, which motivates them to act consciously, study diligently, and maintain honesty. Students express pride in their affiliation with IHLs (Terlemez, 2019).

The idealization of IHL students as morally impeccable individuals by the religious majority results in high expectations. Consequently, any misconduct by an IHL student attracts heightened public scrutiny. Compared to students of other schools, even minor transgressions by IHL students tend to receive disproportionate media attention, becoming trending topics and drawing criticism from both Islamists and secularists.

In general, the pressure of majority expectations is more pronounced in the lives of female IHL students than their male counterparts. Ataç (2019) argues that IHLs construct a

new ideal female archetype aimed at producing ideal religious citizens. For instance, when a video of female IHL students dancing went viral nearly five years ago, a religious newspaper provocatively questioned, "Is this the pious generation?" (Yeni Asya, 24.11.2016). Aware of societal expectations, IHL principals, administrators, teachers, and staff take measures to conform by implementing dress codes, displaying behavioral guidelines, and promoting gender-segregated education.

Ultimately, being an "İmam Hatipli" represents a sense of belonging—an "us." This identity fosters collective actions and shared tendencies. When individuals identify as "İmam Hatipli," they emphasize similarities with each other while simultaneously highlighting differences from the "other." This distinction carries real-world consequences, affecting social acceptance, career opportunities, self-confidence, and interpersonal dynamics. The identity of being an "İmam Hatipli" entails both advantages and disadvantages, as it is embedded with collective memory and history. As Macit (2014) states, "İmam Hatipli' is a collective identity produced and reproduced by this memory" (translation mine).

5.4.3.2.2. *In Hungary.*

The public and political discourse on CSs discussed above can only be properly understood if we take into account the cultural significance of these institutions and the collective memory associated with them. Historians of education, such as István Mészáros and Béla Pukánszky, have extensively documented the history of the Hungarian educational system and the role of CSs within it. Following the introduction of general public education in the second half of the 19th century, the number of both public and CSs increased significantly. The Catholic Church played a particularly active role in public education, making it a primary mission of many monastic orders, extending their influence over both primary and secondary schools. Monastic educators, perceived as having no other commitment than to their students, contributed to the development of a romanticized and positive public image of RSs.

The perception of CSs is not primarily shaped by their curriculum but rather by their spiritual and moral dimensions. These institutions are closely associated with notions of order, discipline, and moral purity. To what extent these idealized memories align with historical reality is debatable. However, this study does not aim to explore the past but rather to examine the presence of historical narratives in contemporary discourse. Sociological studies on attitudes toward CSs indicate strong public demand for such institutions, with broad acceptance extending beyond denominational affiliations. International research conducted by Paul M. Zulehner and Miklós Tomka (Tomka & Zulehner, 2000) between 1997 and 2000 suggests that public willingness to financially support CSs stems from cultural heritage and collective memory rather than direct personal experience. At the time of these studies, the number of CSs in Hungary was still relatively low, making it unlikely that widespread positive attitudes were based on firsthand engagement with these institutions.

Gabriella Pusztai's research on church-maintained secondary schools identified ten primary motivators behind students' and parents' school choices. Her findings suggest that religious education itself is rarely the sole or even the primary reason for choosing CSs. Instead, it is often considered an additional benefit alongside other expectations, such as intellectual rigor, cultural enrichment, and spiritual development. Many parents prioritize strong school communities, viewing them as sources of stability and moral guidance. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds often seek refuge in CSs, perceiving them as safe environments offering moral education. Others, particularly those from non-religious families, may still prefer a church school due to its perceived emphasis on ethical development. Some parents prioritize discipline and security over religious instruction, while others value personalized attention and a nurturing environment. Ultimately, CSs serve as a sanctuary for various student needs, ranging from academic excellence to social belonging and moral development (Pusztai, 2004).

Despite generally positive public sentiment toward CSs, critical perspectives have emerged, particularly under left-wing governments. These critiques have not primarily targeted CSs' educational practices but rather focused on ideological concerns, including freedom of religion and conscience as well as liberal educational principles. Understanding these critiques requires consideration of post-communist political dynamics. After the regime change, historic churches became central to right-wing political forces. Having endured persecution under communism, these churches sought the realization of religious freedom, often advocating for preferential treatment to compensate for past repression. Furthermore, the Hungarian Reformed Church, historically linked to national identity, played a significant role in nationalist political discourse. Consequently, the nationalist rhetoric of right-wing politics and that of major churches became mutually reinforcing ideologies. In contrast, leftist and liberal factions, which prioritized internationalism, often criticized these churches as part of their broader opposition to right-wing policies. As a result, CSs became entangled in political struggles, frequently needing to justify their societal contributions beyond serving religious communities.

Benedictine monk Richárd Korzenszky, who served as Ministerial Commissioner in the Ministry of Culture and Public Education between 1991 and 1994, articulated this complex relationship in the following statement:

"The church schools and the church school owners want nothing more than to be truly equal members of the Hungarian education system. [...] Church schools want to represent value, to offer value freely to those who need it. In a world where the number of children is drastically decreasing, the Church school system, for all its weaknesses, is still competitive and attractive because its focus is on the human being. Church schools have fewer child problems than many other schools. In this situation, at a time when church schools are conservative schools in the true sense of the word, church schools may not be the future for an education policy with liberal values" (Bókay, 2009, para. 4).

This statement underscores how CSs remain at the center of political tensions in contemporary Hungary. However, the significant expansion of CSs following the 2010 change in government and the corresponding rise in public satisfaction indicate that right-wing political objectives regarding education were largely validated. Today, a greater proportion of the population has direct experience with CSs than in previous decades, making public discourse on these institutions less susceptible to purely political or ideological influences.

5.5. Conclusion

This study compared the structures and dynamics of religious schooling in Turkey and Hungary, highlighting the influence of state–religion relations, historical legacies, and institutional frameworks. While Turkey maintains strong state control over religious education, Hungary grants churches considerable autonomy supported by legal protections and material resources. Despite these differences, both systems reveal a comparable pattern: close and structured collaboration between the state and religious institutions to sustain and expand religious education. Regardless of their distinct political, cultural, and historical contexts, both countries demonstrate that religious schooling remains closely tied to state involvement, reflecting a shared approach to integrating religion into the educational sphere.

Chapter Six: Third Study - The Impact of Religious Schools on Students

Following the broad exploration of the state-religion relationship in the first study and its reflection on religious schools (RSs) in the second, this third study narrows its focus to examine the impact of RSs on the religiosity of their students. The literature reveals that the private religious impact of RSs on students has been largely overlooked (Wadsworth & Walker, 2017; McKendrick & Walker, 2020), and there is limited clarity on whether and how RSs influence the religiosity and spiritual maturity of their students, particularly after graduation (Mike, 2019). This study seeks to address this gap.

Data for this study were collected through face-to-face interviews with experts to explore their perceptions of the impacts of RSs. Experts are defined as individuals who conduct research on RSs as academics, teach in RSs, work as educational bureaucrats or administrators, or have authored books, delivered speeches on religious education, or gained popularity on social media with a significant following. This qualitative study adopts a grounded-theory approach to guide the collection and coding of interview data, enabling the identification of emerging categories.

This chapter begins with a literature review, followed by a detailed explanation of my reflections on the data collection process. Reflexivity is a critical component of qualitative research, particularly when the topic is sensitive and the researcher has personal ties to it. The reflection section is succeeded by the data analysis.

6.1. Literature Review

The relationship between education and religiosity has been the subject of extensive scholarly debate. A common view among social scientists is that increased educational attainment often correlates with a decline in religious commitment. For example, studies based on Canadian compulsory schooling laws suggest that each additional year of education may reduce the likelihood of identifying with a religious tradition and decrease religious

participation later in life (Hungerman, 2014; Dilmaghani, 2019). Similar findings have been reported in Turkey, where expanded female education was associated with a decline in outward expressions of religiosity—such as wearing a headscarf or attending Qur'anic courses—and with shifting attitudes toward modernity and political preferences (Cesur & Mocan, 2018; Gulesci & Meyersson, 2012).

However, not all studies agree on this negative correlation. Research based on Spanish Catholics indicated a slight positive link between schooling and religiosity (Brañas-Garzá & Neuman, 2004). In other contexts, such as the U.S. and the U.K., scholars have found that education may enhance religious engagement, particularly in the form of church attendance, which is often considered a socially integrative activity (Brown & Taylor, 2007; Sacerdote, 2001).

Although the relationship between education and religiosity has been extensively studied, RSs have not received comparable scholarly attention, even though they have played a significant role in the historical development of educational systems (D'Agostino & Carozza, 2019; Grace, 2003). Academic interest in RSs has only recently started to grow (Martínez-Ariño & Teinturier, 2019; Uecker, 2008). Much of the existing literature instead focuses on religious education within secular schools and the political or social controversies surrounding religion and schooling. The lack of comprehensive research on RSs has been seen as problematic, as it often results in public debates shaped more by assumptions than by evidence. These debates tend to rely on sweeping claims—both positive and negative—about the influence of RSs on individual autonomy, social cohesion, and broader societal outcomes, often without grounding in educational research (Grace, 2003).

In their meta-analysis, Martínez-Ariño and Teinturier (2019) categorized scholarly research on the intersection of religion and education into three groups: the first focuses on educational programs designed to teach religion, the second examines institutional responses

to religious diversity, and the third addresses political and social debates about the connection between religion and education and the role of RSs. Grace (2003) reviewed research on Catholic schools in the U.S. under four themes: their effects on religious, moral, and social formation; their educational service to the poor and disadvantaged; their contribution to the common good of society; and their school effectiveness and academic outcomes.

Studies that explore RSs from various perspectives to gain a better understanding of their impact have primarily focused on how these schools manage religious and cultural diversity, as well as their effectiveness and broader societal impact (Martínez-Ariño & Teinturier, 2019; D'Agostino & Carozza, 2019). Some studies have addressed the economic aspects of RSs, particularly their impact on wages in the job market (Kim, 2011; Neal, 1997).

Despite the increasing popularity of RSs, their influence on students' personal religiosity remains underexplored (Wadsworth & Walker, 2017; McKendrick & Walker, 2020). There is still little clarity on how these institutions shape students' religious beliefs or spiritual development, particularly after graduation (Mike, 2019). The long-term impact of various types of religious schooling, especially during the early years of education, remains poorly understood (Uecker, 2009). Moreover, the existing literature is largely focused on Christian contexts, while research on RSs affiliated with other faith traditions, such as Islam or Judaism, continues to be limited.

This study aims to review the literature on the impact of RSs on students, with a specific focus on their religiosity. The paper is divided into four sections: the impact of RSs on educational achievement, moral values, gender roles, social cohesion, and religious identity and religiosity.

6.1.1. Educational Achievement

The impact of RSs on students' educational achievement has received more attention in the literature than other dimensions of their influence. Overall, studies suggest a positive

association between RS attendance and academic outcomes. For instance, a meta-analysis of 90 studies found that students in RSs tend to achieve the highest levels of academic success among religious private, charter, and public schools, even after controlling for socioeconomic status (Jeynes, 2012). Similarly, other empirical studies have shown that RS students demonstrate greater academic progress than their peers in non-faith schools, particularly in primary education (Yeshanew et al., 2008; Gibbons & Olmo, 2011). Evidence also suggests that RS students report stronger study habits and attitudes toward learning, such as diligence, punctuality, and class participation (Jeynes, 2003; LeBlanc & Slaughter, 2012). While some research highlights positive educational attainment among graduates of Catholic schools (Altonji et al., 2005), other studies caution that certain RSs may not prioritize autonomy or critical thinking, particularly regarding sensitive subjects like sexuality (Tuastad, 2016).

Some studies have examined the educational effects of RSs within specific social and ethnic communities. Research on Catholic schooling in the U.S. has consistently shown positive results, particularly for disadvantaged groups. Sander (1996) found that prolonged attendance in Catholic grade schools is linked to higher test scores in vocabulary, reading, and mathematics among non-Hispanic white students. Likewise, Neal (1997) argued that Catholic schools in urban areas offer substantial educational benefits to minority students, increasing both high school and college graduation rates, which in turn contribute to improved long-term earnings. Supporting this, Young-Joo (2011) demonstrated that Catholic school attendance is significantly associated with higher wages over the course of one's career, even after accounting for selection bias.

Although most of the literature focuses on Christian schools, some studies have investigated Islamic education in non-Western contexts. In Afghanistan, Burde, Middleton, and Wahl (2015) challenged prevailing assumptions about mosque schools and found that early Islamic education can positively impact children's school readiness and academic achievement.

Their findings revealed that children who attend mosque schools perform better on literacy assessments than their peers who do not.

Some scholars have attempted to understand the underlying reasons for the positive academic performance observed in RSs. While Elder and Jepsen (2014) confirmed that Catholic school students tend to outperform their peers in public schools across multiple metrics, they attributed these results primarily to selection bias rather than the schooling itself. Similarly, Sander (1996) questioned the causal influence of Catholic education, suggesting that higher achievement is largely driven by non-Catholic students enrolled in these schools; once these students are excluded, the so-called Catholic school effect diminishes. Other studies have explored institutional factors. For instance, Godfrey and Morris (2008) proposed that students in RSs tend to take more exams, which may explain their higher average scores. Jeynes (2003), on the other hand, questioned whether academic success should be credited solely to school practices, suggesting that a strong religious work ethic instilled at home might play a role.

Focusing specifically on students from low-income backgrounds, Jeynes (2005) argued that RSs may help close the achievement gap by fostering supportive school cultures and encouraging greater parental involvement. He later emphasized the importance of teacher expectations, noting that religious educators often believe in the potential of every child regardless of their background (Jeynes, 2012). According to him, this mindset contributes to the academic success of disadvantaged students and promotes equity within the school environment.

Not all studies confirm the positive academic outcomes associated with RSs (RSs). Nghiem et al. (2015), examining the influence of primary school type on cognitive and non-cognitive development, found no significant advantage for students attending independent or Catholic schools when accounting for unobserved individual factors. In some cases, students in Catholic schools even performed worse than their public-school counterparts. Similarly,

Chachashvili-Bolotin and Lissitsa (2016) reported that among first- and second-generation immigrant students in Israel, those attending RSs were less likely to receive matriculation certificates compared to their peers in other types of schools. They noted that school type partly mediates the educational outcomes of Western immigrant students and is often influenced by the family's religious background.

Other studies have highlighted broader contextual factors or long-term effects. Cardak and Vecci (2013) observed that the academic advantage once associated with Catholic high schools in Australia has diminished, possibly due to a rise in disadvantaged student enrollments and shifts in resource allocation. Although Catholic schools still tend to have fewer resources than public ones, the narrowing resource gap suggests other explanations for the decline. Additionally, Schwarz and Sikkink (2016) explored the relationship between RS attendance and adult perspectives on science. While religious school graduates did not reject science outright, they often perceived tension between scientific knowledge and their personal beliefs, even though exposure to formal science education generally broadened their understanding.

6.1.2. Moral Values

The second major theme in the literature on RSs concerns their influence on students' moral development. Most studies suggest that RSs positively shape moral values, particularly in comparison to non-religious schools. Hofmann-Towfigh (2007) found that RS students tend to value tradition more and hedonism less than their peers in secular or state schools. In another study exploring the effect of storytelling on moral understanding, Arthur, Harrison, and Davison (2015) reported that RS students aged 9–11 demonstrated a more advanced grasp of virtue-related language and concepts. Similarly, LeBlanc and Slaughter (2012) observed that Christian school graduates were more likely than public school graduates to report being guided by strong moral convictions, such as a serious approach to studies, willingness to help others, readiness to share and defend their faith, and taking responsibility for their actions.

A number of studies have also linked RSs to reduced engagement in harmful or illegal behaviors. Francis, ap Siôn, and Village (2014) showed that students in independent Christian schools reported higher self-esteem and greater rejection of drug use, racism, and illegal behaviors, along with more conservative views on sexuality. In Israel, Isralowitz and Reznik (2015) found that male students from religious high schools were less likely to engage in binge drinking, violence, or risky driving compared to students from secular schools. Research by Figlio and Ludwig (2012) reinforced these findings, noting that RS attendance was associated with reduced involvement in behaviors such as teen sexual activity, arrests, and hard drug use. Groce (2019) also identified a connection between participation in RS activities and reduced incidents of bullying.

Despite the prevailing positive assessments, some scholars have challenged the assumption that RSs consistently produce higher moral outcomes. Bruggeman and Hart (1996) found no significant differences between RS and secular school students in terms of moral reasoning or behavior; both groups displayed similarly high levels of dishonest behavior. Likewise, Zubairu (2016), studying students in Malaysia, concluded that there was no measurable difference in overall moral competence between graduates of RSs and their secular counterparts.

6.1.3. Gender Roles

Many religious traditions promote specific gender roles, and students in RSs are often influenced by these teachings, which can shape their educational paths and life choices. Research on the impact of RSs on gender attitudes presents mixed results.

Mather (2018) examined gender attitudes among students in Guatemalan private RSs and found that Catholic school students tend to hold more egalitarian views compared to their counterparts in evangelical or secular schools. Interestingly, biblical literalists were the most publicly egalitarian. Contrary to some claims that secular schools foster more gender equality,

Catholic schools in Guatemala appeared to be the most egalitarian, with evangelical schools showing no significant difference from secular schools once relevant controls were applied.

Dallavis (2015) investigated gender differences in college major choices and bachelor's degree attainment among religious high school students. The study revealed that RS students perform as well as or better than public school students in preparation for higher education, with no significant gender disparities affecting women's choice of college major.

In Bangladesh, Asadullah, Amin, and Chaudhury (2018) studied youth attitudes toward gender in rural secondary schools and reformed madrasas, finding a preference for boys' higher education over girls', an idealization of housewives for child-rearing rather than working women, and favoring larger families. Madrasah students, especially those attending unrecognized madrasas, exhibited more traditional and less favorable views on women's roles compared to peers in non-religious schools. However, these differences were partially linked to teacher-related factors such as training and family size.

Rao and Hossain (2011) explored how madrasa education in Bangladesh interacts with social inequalities. For male graduates, learning Arabic facilitated migration to Gulf countries, enabling social and economic advancement. Female students' Qur'an recitation skills were viewed as vital for socializing children, especially in households with absent migrant fathers. Thus, madrasa education contributed to the continuation of gender inequalities, while simultaneously providing a counter-culture that allowed rural poor to gain social status and material benefits.

6.1.4. Social Cohesion

As multicultural societies grow increasingly diverse, debates have emerged about the role of RSs in fostering social cohesion and tolerance.

Everett (2012) investigated RS students' attitudes toward tolerance and found no significant differences compared to non-faith school students. Across all school types, students

tended to be less tolerant toward members of different religious groups than toward other marginalized groups such as immigrants. Additionally, Muslim Independent School students showed lower tolerance toward behaviors contradicting Islamic teachings. Similarly, Nazar, Österman, and Björkqvist (2017) found that Pakistani madrasa students scored lowest on gender equality and religious tolerance, particularly among girls, and highest on hostile attitudes toward India. These students also perceived themselves as victims of religious intolerance, with religious tolerance strongly linked to positive gender attitudes.

In urban contexts, Mohamed Ali and Bagley (2015) reported that a Canadian Muslim private school emphasized Islamic identity within a multicultural community, promoting values like respect, honesty, fairness, and justice. They argued that such schools could contribute to building a more cohesive and tolerant society. However, Everett (2018) again found no significant impact of RSs on students' tolerance attitudes, while McGlynn (2005) warned about the potential negative effects of RSs on social cohesion in Northern Ireland, advocating integrated schooling. Hemming (2018) observed that rural RSs could affect social cohesion positively or negatively, depending on their policies and ability to build social capital.

Research also examined the link between RS attendance and political knowledge. Belfield (2003) found that Catholic school students demonstrated higher civic skills, political knowledge, and tolerance. In Bangladesh, Asadullah, Amin, and Chaudhury (2018) challenged assumptions about madrasas rejecting modernity, noting that female madrasa students opposed military rule.

Religious education has also been considered a potential tool against extremism. Wainscott (2015) analyzed Islamic education in Morocco after the 2003 Casablanca bombings and found that defenders of Islamic education argued it acted as a form of "vaccination" against extremism, countering claims linking religious education to violence.

6.1.5. Religious Identity/Religiosity

The relationship between RSs and students' religious identity and religiosity has received limited attention in the literature, with mixed findings. It is worth noting that the terms "religious identity" and "religiosity" are sometimes used interchangeably in the literature, although they can refer to distinct concepts. This review addresses both aspects broadly, as many studies do not clearly distinguish between the two. While some researchers argue that RSs positively influence students' religiosity, others question this effect and highlight the stronger influence of family upbringing on students' religious development.

Wang (2012) identified key factors that contribute to this process, including a community of religious peers, the presence of religious adults, and exposure to religious instruction. Similarly, Mitchell (2015) emphasized the importance of spiritual nurturing in RSs, based on students' own reflections. Cumiskey (2019) found that participation in faith-based programs during high school can support lasting spiritual maturity and continued growth after graduation.

Others have focused on how school environments influence religious expression and values. Barrett, Pearson, Muller, and Frank (2007) concluded that school norms shape both public religious behaviors and private devotional practices, highlighting the role of school climate in youth identity development. Francis (2002) found that Catholic schools offer a stronger moral and religious climate than non-denominational schools, with students in the former scoring higher on measures of religious and moral values.

Some studies suggest that RSs can counteract the general trend of declining religiosity with increased education. Wadsworth and Walker (2017), referencing Hungerman's (2014) findings, argued that while compulsory secular education reduces religiosity, private religious and Catholic schooling can have a stronger and lasting positive effect, especially two years

after graduation. They concluded that RSs may be an effective option for parents aiming to foster long-term religious engagement.

Sander (2001) found that Catholic schooling in the U.S. strengthens religious identity and practices in adulthood. Attendees were more likely to pray daily, believe in life after death, attend church frequently, and continue identifying as Catholics. He emphasized that Catholic schools help preserve religious culture through faith-based education.

Uecker (2008) examined various forms of schooling—Catholic, Protestant, and homeschooling—and their impact on public and private religiosity. Catholic school students reported more frequent church attendance and greater valuation of faith, though they were less involved in youth groups. Protestant schoolers displayed higher private religiosity than their public school peers, while homeschoolers showed no significant differences across the measures studied.

While RSs are often associated with increased religiosity, some studies suggest that these effects may not be enduring. Wadsworth and Walker (2017) found that although Catholic and private religious schooling initially boost religious participation, the effects tend to diminish over time.

Other research emphasizes the stronger influence of intrinsic religiosity and family background. McKendrick and Walker (2020) observed that being religious at age 14 was a more reliable predictor of religiosity at age 25 than RS attendance. Similarly, Bertram-Troost, de Roos, and Miedema (2007) concluded that school alone does not significantly shape students' religious commitments; instead, students' personal histories and parental influence play a more substantial role. While pupils perceived that schools affect their worldview, the data showed limited direct impact.

In a follow-up study, Bertram-Troost et al. (2009) examined how secondary religious education contributes to religious identity. They found only a weak correlation between

classroom religious instruction and students' actual religious explorations or commitments. However, pupils' subjective perceptions of their religious education still mattered, as did their backgrounds, value orientations, and broader worldview.

The role of family influence is also apparent in studies on school selection. Cohen-Zada and Elder (2018) argued that religious families often choose RSs to shield children from secularism or competing religious influences. Using U.S. data, they found that demand for RSs declines when a religious group is demographically dominant, reducing perceived external threats. Their findings suggest that preserving religious identity is a central motivation behind parental decisions to opt for religious education.

Uecker (2009) analyzed data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to compare the religious lives of young adults who attended Protestant, Catholic, or secular schools. His findings showed that Protestant schools are more effective in cultivating a religious environment, while Catholic schools do not significantly influence students' religiosity compared to secular schools. This difference, Uecker suggested, may stem from the varying emphasis placed on religious development: less than half of Catholic schools identify it as a primary aim, compared to two-thirds of conservative Christian schools. Moreover, he noted that many Catholic school students—and their parents—may choose these schools primarily for educational rather than religious reasons, which could explain the lack of significant impact on religiosity.

In a different context, Ferrara (2017) explored how private Muslim schools in France contribute not only to religious formation but also to the construction of a distinct French Muslim identity. She argued that these schools offer an alternative approach to navigating France's contemporary pluralism. Rather than fully assimilating into secular French norms or rejecting them outright, Muslim schools aim to cultivate civic engagement grounded in Islamic

values. This dual orientation reflects a redefinition of what it means to be both French and Muslim, signaling a process of identity-making that embraces complexity and nuance.

The broader debate over the role of RSs has led to both strong advocacy and criticism. Supporters argue that RSs are an essential component of democratic societies, as they uphold parental rights to choose state-funded religious education. Grace (2012) contends that much of the opposition to RSs is not grounded in evidence but reflects polemical or prejudiced viewpoints.

In contrast, critics such as Marples (2005) argue that RSs pose a serious risk to children's autonomy, particularly their emotional development, and thus conflict with the educational goals of a liberal democracy. He challenges the notion that parents should have the right to educate their children strictly according to their religious beliefs and raises concerns about the potentially indoctrinatory nature of RSs.

Admission policies are another area of controversy. Weldon (2008) found that oversubscribed church schools in England were less likely to admit local students from minority ethnic backgrounds. Similarly, a report by The Challenge, SchoolDash, and the iCoCo Foundation (2017) identified RSs as significant contributors to ethnic and socio-economic segregation in the state-funded school system. The report noted that these schools tend to enroll fewer disadvantaged students and those with special educational needs, while admitting more high-achieving pupils. According to the findings, RSs are among the most socially selective schools—over three times more selective than non-faith schools relative to their catchment areas.

The autonomy of RSs remains a contested issue. Critics highlight that RSs are often vulnerable to political influence, with their fate—whether closure or continued support—shaped by the priorities of ruling governments (Toker & Celal Özcan, 2017). Riley, Marks, and Grace (2003) acknowledged the traditional role of RSs in shaping students' religious values

and identities, but expressed concern over contemporary developments. What now divides RSs, they argued, is not their religious character per se, but whether they have become politicized and compromised their religious and educational missions for ideological ends.

Increased state support for RSs has also led to tighter government regulation, raising further concerns, especially in publicly funded contexts. Walford (2001), in a comparative analysis of the Netherlands and England, demonstrated that while state funding brings material benefits, it often reduces school autonomy. Areas such as curriculum, staffing, admissions, inspections, and governance come under state control. As a result, RSs may lose their distinctiveness, with many showing signs of secularization. According to Walford, religious affiliation among staff and students has weakened in many RSs, and religious practice is often limited to formal requirements like religious education classes and brief assemblies.

This decline in religious emphasis has contributed to the emergence of independent schools founded by churches and parents who seek to preserve stronger religious values. Walford (2001) noted that as publicly funded RSs have become more secular, they have become less appealing to families who prioritize religious instruction. Nevertheless, even independent schools are not entirely free from external oversight and control.

The literature reviewed above demonstrates that RSs can offer both advantages and disadvantages depending on the context. They are often associated with positive effects on students' moral and educational development and, under certain conditions, social cohesion. However, concerns remain that RSs may also foster intolerance or contribute to social and ethnic segregation, which in turn links to academic achievement, as selection processes tend to favor already successful students.

The impact of RSs on religiosity appears limited unless students come from religiously committed backgrounds. In addition, academic reputation—rather than religion alone—often

shapes parental school choice. Some critics argue that the perceived success of RSs may partly reflect their ability to attract already advantaged or motivated students.

6.2. The Main Analysis

The objective of this study is to explore the impact of religious education on students' religiosity. As outlined in the methodology section, GT has been employed to systematically collect and analyze the data. The inherent nature of GT facilitates the emergence of novel concepts directly derived from the gathered data. Respondents not only articulated their perspectives on the central research question but also provided comprehensive explanations from various angles, allowing for the development of new and nuanced concepts.

In total, 18 interviews were conducted in Turkey, while 11 interviews were conducted in Hungary. To ensure clarity and consistency, participants were assigned coded identifiers instead of pseudonyms. Turkish respondents were labeled as T1, T2, T3, and so on, while Hungarian respondents were designated as H1, H2, H3, etc.

Adhering to the GT principles established by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and the rigor guidelines proposed by Birks and Mills (2011), the researcher adopted both an analytical and interpretive approach to identifying codes. This process ultimately led to the recognition of overarching themes and the construction of a theory firmly grounded in empirical data. While some themes exhibited similarities between Turkey and Hungary, others revealed distinct patterns. This section will examine these emerging themes separately for each country.

6.2.1. Turkey

The majority of interviewees asserted that IHLs exert minimal influence on students' religiosity. Instead, atheism and deism within IHLs emerged as notable phenomena. However, perspectives diverged regarding the reasons behind their increase, visibility, or heightened recognition. Some experts attributed this trend to the teachings of IHLs, while others emphasized the role of social factors. As new explanations surfaced during interviews,

subsequent participants were asked additional questions, leading to the progressive expansion of the inquiry and the identification of new concepts. Consequently, certain questions were not posed to the initial interviewees.

The emerging themes centered around two key issues: (1) the presence and prevalence of atheism and deism within IHLs, and (2) the diverse factors contributing to these trends. The underlying reasons, as identified through the interviews, were categorized into five sub-themes: political reasons, the youth factor, educational reasons, religious reasons and technological reasons. These overarching themes and their corresponding sub-themes will be examined in detail, supported by evidence from the collected data.

6.2.1.1. There is or There is not.

One of the initial research questions that guided this study concerned whether atheism-deism is a genuine phenomenon in IHLs. The analysis revealed that responses varied not only based on religious and political affiliations but also on individual experiences.

There are diverse perspectives regarding the existence of atheism-deism in IHLs among the experts I interviewed. Six of them were certain that there are atheist-deist students among IHL students and graduates. Five experts asserted that there is no imminent threat of atheism-deism in IHLs, while another five acknowledged its presence but considered it not as prevalent. Among all, seven experts argued that there are discernible changes among IHL students, but it is not atheism-deism; rather, it reflects alterations in their behaviors. The experts referred to it as a growing indifference towards religion or a shift towards secularism.

There is: In religious vocational schools (IHLs), experts asserting the noteworthy prevalence of atheism-deism supported their claims with personal experiences. T5, a theology professor with 20 years of experience in religious studies and IHL, attributed his unwavering confidence to an increasing number of students approaching him yearly, confessing their atheism. He noted, "We know there are people in the religious community, such as

homosexuals, atheists, deists, and non-believers. However, they cannot voice their opinions due to fear of reactions. It's the psychology of being a minority. So, the fact that these people are not vocal does not mean they do not exist. They are definitely increasing (there is a strong emphasis on the phrase increasing -kesssinlikle-" (T5). T13, another theology professor with extensive teaching experience in IHL, expressed difficulty in grasping the evolving nature of the phenomenon, stating, "We are still going through this process, and we do not know where it will lead or how it will evolve" (T13).

T8, a high-ranking official in an opposition education union, claimed awareness of an undisclosed survey conducted by the Ministry of National Education (MEB) and a religious group, suggesting an increase in atheism-deism in IHL. T9, a left-wing union member, atheist, and teacher in IHL, mentioned the existence of atheist students who conceal their beliefs due to school pressure. There are those who come to him and secretly ask questions about left-wing ideology or Atatürk. He said that there are many female students who, after graduating, choose to remove their headscarf. He added, "Many students want to leave the school, and I know I am holding them back! My son, endure and bear it! He says, 'If I stay here, I will become an unbeliever'" (T9).

T17, a senior member of the Atheist Association, said, 'Unfortunately,' the number of members who are students or graduates of IHL has increased. While encountering a few IHL individuals annually in the years 2014-15, in the last few years, this number has significantly risen. In the past three to four months, during his active duty, half of the individuals visiting the office were IHL affiliates. Some come for information, networking, while others come to volunteer.

Some experts sadly mentioned that IHL-affiliated young people and/or their families are reaching out to them for help. T18, a theology professor, highlighted concerning levels of

atheism-deism among IHL students or graduates, prompting families to approach him seeking advice and discussions with their children on this matter.

Speaking unequivocally on the topic, T1, a theologian and writer, also asserted being frequently approached by individuals seeking advice or assistance due to the rapid increase in atheism-deism. He mentioned the struggles of young people on the verge of leaving their faith but finding it challenging to fully detach, emphasizing the shift away from religiosity in future generations. T1 concluded, "This will be the last religious generation they raise (He referred to the government and the ruling party.). People are gradually moving away from religion... First towards natural religion... and if that doesn't work, towards atheism. In atheism, they find a morality that allows for entertainment, doesn't interfere in every aspect of life, and simply advises to be right, be honest, and work hard. That's enough for them" (T1).

There is not: Experts who claimed that there is no problem with atheism-deism in IHLs justified their claims in several ways. Some stated that this debate is not new, asserting that it is already an existing discussion in Islamic history. According to T2, a theologian, research on this matter is lacking a scale measuring deism, and some individuals are labeling it as deism or atheism based on the lifestyle of young people. Others argued that some make such claims just to gain fame. T11, a theology professor sharing similar views, said that such discussions are normal, and whether expressed or not, every young person goes through this phase. T11 also noted that openly discussing this is now easier, and although some may label it as atheism, it is not necessarily the case.

Another academician who rejected the existence of such a situation, T3, argued that these debates have always been present in Islamic history. T3 criticized the simplistic perspective of saying, "When the number of IHL increases, low-quality students also come, and some of the low-quality students become deist or atheist." He claimed that some research is statistically unreliable, emphasizing that studies should consistently yield similar results.

Even if there is a small increase reflected in the statistics, it might be due to people feeling more comfortable expressing themselves compared to before and raises the question: "Why is it increasing now but not 10-20 years ago? What has changed? We need to explain that" (T3).

T16 works for a large association that supports religious vocational schools, and he found this debate artificial. He argued that the current religious education will not positively or negatively influence a young person's religiosity. The memorization-oriented religious education is insufficient for building morality, and one day, this type of education will have to be changed under the pressure of students. T16 added, "The debate about deist atheist Imam Hatip students is not something with a background. It's an artificial debate, frankly... There is no result report, no workshop report on deism in IHLs" (T16).

T14, who found the deism-atheism debate absurd, claimed that nobody, including those who initiated the deism discourse, knows what deism is. "They've just talked nonsense! Someone says something about deism, and everyone is actually quoting from him. ... The debate about the increase of deism and atheism is absurd and pointless because I don't think either the students or the teachers are aware of these discussions on deism. None of them have any idea. It's not on their agenda, the students, I mean" (T14). While acknowledging the presence of some questions from religious vocational school students, he argued that these questions are cliché and memorized: "I mean... They haven't thought about it individually. In individual terms, he/she has not contemplated or confused. They've heard something somewhere, thought it seems right, and started using it" (T14).

There is but not much: Another group of respondents stated that there is atheism-deism in IHLs but it is not very high. T4, who claimed that the youth generally have an inclination towards orientations like deism, atheism, and agnosticism, mentioned that these tendencies also exist in IHLs, albeit at a low rate. The reason, according to T4, is that atheist-deist tendencies are more quickly noticed in RSs. He argued that atheism-deism does not have

a significant impact on social life in Türkiye, and added, regarding IHLs: "If you ask how much they are infected with that 'disease,' thankfully... they are not at a greater risk. There is a risk, we have enough reasons to be concerned, but there is no need to be pessimistic" (T4).

T6, who claimed that atheist-deist tendencies affect the youth in the entire Islamic world but never reach a certain point, added that these trends occasionally increase and decrease in Türkiye. However, according to T10, who said that secular theologians are increasing and an isolated form of religion is being produced. He explained the term "isolated religion": "It's like alcohol-free drinks or cheese without fat. A strange generation is emerging." While these discussions affect the youth in IHLs, the ratio of atheist-deist is still not a cause for significant concern, and T10 remarked: "The debates on deism and atheism are exaggerated. Exaggerated, and it's aimed at troubling the AKP government" (T10).

According to T12, who described deism as a path chosen by the youth who do not trust religious institutions, discard all authorities, yet cannot completely sever their relationship with God, the farthest the youth can go is deism, not atheism. It is a move towards individual religious understanding without completely abandoning religion, in line with the spirit of the times. This general trend also affects the youth in IHL.

T14 argued that in today's education system, a school or lessons cannot change a person's life or religiosity, and IHLs are no exception to this. It does not make a student more or less religious. However, "...compared to the old IHLs... If you compare it with those 10 or 20 years ago, yes. I mean, there are also students (emphasizing 'also') who have such problems in IHLs" (T14). Atheist-deist discussions are not specific to Turkey, and in a globally connected world, one cannot completely avoid these discussions. What is reflected in the agenda of society, reaching IHLs too, yet, not as exaggerated as claimed. According to T14, there are atheist-deist students in IHLs. "I cannot give a specific percentage because I don't have data. I mean... there may even be non-believing students. There may even be atheist students, but

when you look at them within the total, in a country fed by diverse thoughts and a rapidly modernizing and open society like Turkey... I think it should be considered as a possibility. You have to evaluate it within the realm of possibility... So, saying that going to Imam Hatip completely prevents questioning of faith for 100% of them is not possible" (T14).

There is something but not atheism-deism: The other perspective of experts on atheism-deism in IHLs can be summarized as follows: there is something going on, but it is not necessarily atheism-deism. The youth are not engaged in a philosophical search that leads them to be atheist-deist. There is no one saying 'I compared philosophical schools, and I am choosing this one among them.' According to T7, there is no intellectual dimension; rather, ideas are acquired without effort, influenced more by popular culture: "It's the same with the young people I encounter. Generally, it's a reactionary movement or indifference and laziness" (T7). Most of these young people don't know what deism is, what atheism is; it's not a conscious and inquiry-driven process.

In fact, these young people cannot name this situation; someone else tells them, "You are like this." T9 explained this with an example: "Imagine this... you feel unwell, you sense discomfort in your body, you know you are sick, but you don't know what illness you have. So, someone told the child what he thinks... what he thinks... what he thinks. He said, 'You are a deist.' ... The child cannot directly say, 'I am an atheist.' He cannot say that. First, he thinks, 'What should I do? Let's skip Friday. Then let's skip Ramadan. After that, let's be a bit godless but still believe in God.' It goes step by step; the child doesn't dive in suddenly. It would be difficult if it happened suddenly. He cannot handle it himself, and the surroundings cannot either" (T9). Additionally, "Children currently don't know how to talk in terms. They cannot define what it is... When you say, 'My daughter, my son, you are like this,' they say, 'Oh, really? I didn't know that.' ... They're just thinking; they still don't know what it is. They are learning right now by feeling. Unconsciously, without being aware. They are entering the flow of

something, but they don't know if it's a sea, a river, or a lake. They learn it unconsciously... unconsciously" (T9).

According to T9, if you tell a student that they have become a deist based on their lifestyle or conversations, they would reject it and say, 'No, I am a Muslim.' For T9, "They are not aware that it's their lifestyle... it's a way of life, but there is no philosophy! The body is roaming around, but the soul... the soul is in a different place..." (T9). Even if the student knows they are atheist-deist, they do not have the courage to pronounce it, as the school atmosphere does not allow it. "However, they express it through their actions, for example, by not going to the mosque. Then they say, 'Let me get rid of this from here... then I'll know what I'll do'" (T9). After graduation, the student changes. They become more groomed and try to enjoy life. In reality, there is no difference between the religious person on the street and the religious person in IHLs.

T10, stating that children do not express the situation they are in and someone else labels it, said there are no children saying they have become deists. "Those who ask how to explain this indifference, unconcern, and indifference in the youth (towards religion) by looking from the outside, explain it with these because there are no other concepts in their vocabulary" (T10). According to T10, deism is actually the stance of young people who do not want to leave religion. He explained it with an example: "No, on the contrary... there is something like this here... those who cannot risk slamming the door and going outside, and saying goodbye... In other words, the children... going to the balcony and waiting there in the cold, but on the balcony of the house" (T10).

T16, stating that deism is interpreted through societal indicators such as the formation of conservative people's entertainment culture and not praying, said this is not deism. Deism has a philosophy; it is a secularization that is happening. For him, there is a hidden agenda behind this because deism has been turned into a propaganda tool. "For this reason... because

the youth are involved in this discussion. I mean... the youth are involved in the debates. They follow them on social media, watch them on TV. Now they are told that they are deists. In a way, you are creating a forbidden fruit for them, saying, 'Look, look, there are things here.' So, I think there is a misdirection here" (T16). However, for him, if the topic is secularization, both students in IHLs and regular high schools are going through the same process with the entire society. Because there are no longer high-walled, closed IHLs. The walls have been overcome, so societal debates also affect them. Looking from the similar perspective, T17 stated that even if not atheism-deism, says that people's religious levels have decreased and become more secularized.

T16, claiming that deism is particularly being pushed into the agenda of young people, talked about another issue and says that the real danger is not atheist-deist but agnostic tendencies. "For me, what is more frightening is agnostic... a generation that does not take anything (anything related to religion) into its agenda in any way. They are the real atheists. I am afraid of a generation that says, 'It is not my concern, whether negative or positive. It should not be in my agenda'... not thinking... I mean, saying it is not my concern. Not... even atheists believe in the existence of God in some way because at least it is debatable for them. They think about it, make an effort... but not for the agnostic. They are not even on the path" (T16).

It is actually a protest of young people against adults, according to T18, and adults who give a name to this protest call it deism. In fact, deism has a philosophy, it has a doctrine which children need to read and understand it; but young people do not know it. "As a reaction... in my opinion, deism manifests itself as a protest attitude even in IHLs... that's why deism is a protest movement in Turkey" (T18).

Secularization: Some participants who stated that the current situation is not atheism-deism could not name it, while others clearly stated that it is secularization. Some participants, who observed that there have been some changes, both specifically in IHLs and generally in

the whole society, noted that this distancing from religion was wrongly interpreted. According to them, what is happening is not atheism-deism but worldliness or secularization. The participants, who used these two terms interchangeably, emphasized that as a result of modernization, societies would secularize sooner or later. Some participants interpreted this as more dangerous than atheist-deist trends.

T17 said that even if it is not atheism-deism, the level of religiosity among people has decreased and they have become more secular. T12 defined secularization, which he saw as a more important issue than atheism-deism: "In the Quran, secularization, that is, becoming worldly, binding everything to the world, accumulating wealth without considering halal or haram. The Quran is not against wealth... It says help the poor, but this person does not see the poor. All these lead to secularization or becoming worldly. Being worldly means believing that everything ends with death, but living as if it will end" (T12).

Many participants expressed the opinion that society began to view religion more distantly, especially after the July 15 coup attempt. The religious segment secularized. T15 stated that there was a general dissolution in society against religion and a more secular perspective started to take root in society. According to T6, society has sought a more secular interpretation of religion to legitimize this dissolution.

Changing lifestyle with modernism: Modernism is a natural result of urbanization and industrialization, and the natural result of modernism is secularism. Some participants said that where there are prerequisites for industrialization and modernization, secularization is inevitable and there is definitely no turning back. According to T5, "atheism is the extreme point of secularism, its peak. The main title of this subject... the umbrella title... is secularism" (T5).

The lifestyle that came with modernization distanced not only IHL students but also adults from religion. Although religiosity has gained visibility in the country, there is no

increase in quality or quantity. According to T12, "As the rate of benefiting from the world's blessings increases, religiosity does not increase, it decreases" (T12).

In addition to the conveniences provided by technology, the pious/conservative segment whose welfare level increased with the AKP government started to hesitate in adhering to religious rules. Those who do not want to comply with the measures set by religion start questioning it and prefer a secular lifestyle by saying that these rules cannot be lived by in this age. T6 claimed that this is not atheism-deism: "...this is not atheism or deism. This is drifting towards a looser structure, a search for interpreting halal and haram differently... but not completely distancing from religion. It is a more secular interpretation. They can return to their essence later, it is not a big drift" (T6). Religious commands are difficult in this age for them, religious people are looking for a new interpretation of religion. "...and some may fail the test. There is a visible difference in welfare between the past and the present. It means that we... need to make a great effort regarding the test of Muslims with money. That is... we need to understand well the people who become distant from religion after getting rich while being religious when they were poor..." (T6). T13, who pointed to a similar situation, also talked about being tested with money and losing. When it comes to interests, religion and ideology remain details for pious people who interpret religion as it suits them.

Atheist participants also drew attention to religious people who distance themselves from religion for worldly pleasures and interests. People distance themselves from religion because religion hinders the comfort that money brings. Islam seems boring to Muslims. T9 related this to political power. "When the religious segment gets involved in the economy, what happens... The faith part also slowly starts to change..." (T9). According to him, the current political formation is established on the distribution of capital, and what matters here is not to be genuinely religious, but to appear Islamist. "...the current conservative segment says... do not ask for sharia from me, but you can ask for green dollars from me. Okay, green. That is

also the symbol of religion... I will pour plenty of dollars on you, I will give it to you, you will enjoy this world... I will give you the goods and property of this world, but what will you do... What will we do... We will do this under a religious umbrella. There is a hidden de facto thing... I will use religion, you will use religion. Ultimately, where does this lead to... eee... it leads to something like this. You are a religious opportunist (dinci), but not pious (dindar)" (T9).

Participants who claimed that secularization depending on the conditions of modernism is inevitable strongly opposed desecularization theories. Academics among these participants accused theorists who claimed that secularization theory is dead of being mistaken. According to T5, the fact that the speed of secularization in a country is less than others does not mean desecularization, there is only slower secularization and the slowness of secularization does not mean desecularization.

Institutional desecularization: Some participants who noted that even the religious segment of society secularized in the process of modernization also pointed to the efforts of administrators to halt this flow. The term mentioned here was institutional desecularization. Are religious institutions, whose numbers and financial power have increased with state support, protecting their adherents and society at large from secularization? The general answer to this question was no. Increasing the number of IHLs does not make students more religious and does not prevent them from becoming more secular over time. Even if students do not abandon religion, they secularize and adopt a lifestyle that does not comply with religious commands.

The interest shown in religious institutions was interpreted not as an increase in religiosity, but as support for the state to which these institutions belong. T1 and T5 spoke of a type of religiosity combined with nationalism. Where there are national religious institutions, the support is not for the religious institution but for the state, not for God but for nationalism. Therefore, the examples of desecularization in Turkey and around the world are actually not

desecularization but efforts to expand political influence using religion. The strengthening of institutional religion does not mean the strengthening of individual religiosity. In fact, there is institutional desecularization and individual and societal secularization.

"I am absolutely certain that the most important reason for institutional desecularization is political, it does not mean desecularization. States want to strengthen institutional religion for very important reasons... which are political. Don't perceive this as desecularization. Perceive it as one of the means of state influence... as having mosques. ...Look, today in Turkey ...the more the number of IHLs increases, the more the ratio of those entering there... becomes a backyard. But you cannot say that Imam Hatip students do not date... All of them are my students. They are all secularizing... at an advanced level" (T5).

Therefore, there is no difference left between students in IHLs and general schools. There is a common culture, a lifestyle that affects them equally. They all read the same best-selling books, discuss the same topics, and are influenced by similar things. "So, think of it this way... there is no longer a school type called Imam Hatip or x y z! All schools are the same" (T14).

In this respect, as most participants expressed, the increase in the institutional dimension of religion by the government is useless and even counterproductive. The reason for this is again the unprecedented increase in access to information with modernization and technological developments. Access to alternative information, that is, the internet, influences individuals more than religious institutions and leads to secularization. Religious education is also ineffective at this point.

The interviews generally indicated that the claims of desecularization occurring due to the increase in the number of religious institutions are incorrect. Even if mosques were completely closed, society would not become irreligious in ten years. Similarly, building a mosque on every corner will not make society more religious. Institutional indicators do not

point to individual desecularization. T5 expressed this situation by referring to the influence of politics on religion. "As I said, in all our analyses... we must analyze according to the variable of politics. Politics is a very interesting thing. We have entered a period where religion is intensely used by politicians worldwide, and this misleads us, my friend. We think there is desecularization... but we are foolish. This misleads us" (T5).

One of the issues that all participants agreed on was that social engineering did not work even in times when access to information was not as easy as it is now, and it certainly would not work now. People cannot be made religious or irreligious by force. Top-down modernization or demodernization is not possible. Societies change slowly, in their own flow. Social engineering generally backfires. Just as top-down modernization did not work in the early years of the Republic, the current desecularization will not work. Efforts to increase religiosity through institutions are therefore futile. Even though social engineering does not work in any direction, societies secularize as they modernize. "...society gradually secularizes. And once it secularizes, once it tastes secularization, once it tastes freedom, it will be hard to turn back..." (T5).

T1, who said that religiosity/desecularization through the state would not work, argued that state-supported desecularization would first lead to secularization and then to atheism and deism. The stronger the state's support or pressure for religiosity, the faster and harsher this process will be. According to T18, constant top-down intervention and authoritarian and commanding rhetoric will not work. "Top-down religiosity brings deep irreligiosity. Go and look at Iran... it's like that. Go and look at Saudi Arabia, it's like that. If Turkey... a country where this should never happen... tries to do this from the top, this will be the result. This cannot be done from the top. What it was in the Prophet's society was... that revelations came according to the demands of the people. So, it was not a top-down command but considering the people..." (T18).

In summary, interviews indicate that some participants acknowledge the positive or negative impact of IHL on religiosity, while others argue that IHL is no different from any other school in this regard. Some participants, claiming that the trend spreading in IHL is not atheism-deism, state that someone else has given it a name, and young people do not label themselves this way. They argue that young people who identify themselves as atheist-deist did not reach this conclusion through a philosophical quest. It was emphasized by some participants that the changes observed in young people are not atheist-deist but rather secularization, and this is a universal phenomenon. Participants who claim that IHL negatively affects religiosity attribute this directly or indirectly to the school itself. The intense exposure of young people attending IHL to religion was cited as one of the reasons for the increase in the atheist-deist ratio. Some respondents described the situation as secularization, a change in lifestyle. People now do not follow religious rules, not because they are atheist or deist, but simply because they prefer to live according to their own wills. Therefore, the government's efforts to desecularize people through religious institutions will not work.

Participants who argued that institutional desecularization would not work attributed this to modernization and the living conditions brought by technology. As societies modernize, they become wealthier in terms of daily needs, and as they become wealthier, the use of transportation and communication tools increases. With greater access to transportation and communication technologies, opportunities to reach alternative worlds, information, and lifestyles also increase. This process accelerates secularization. Therefore, the only way to achieve desecularization is to demodernize society. "The only way to desecularize is to demodernize. Not to increase the level of knowledge, to impoverish people, to make people stupid, to keep people away from information. ... Desecularization is possible, depending on the premise of demodernization. The deterministic result of modernization is secularization. Look, I'm using the word deterministic for the first time! Wherever the agents of modernization

enter, it gradually secularizes. The reverse is also true... Demodernizing people will desecularize them and make them more religious" (T5).

The interviews, where the initial question was about the impact of IHL on religiosity, raised answers and new questions beyond this issue. The second main theme that emerged from the interviews was the reasons for atheism and deism in IHLs. Many different and sometimes conflicting reasons were put forward by the participants. These were grouped under seven main headings: political, socio-economic, family, youth/age, technological, educational, and religious. It is important to note that these categories are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are often interconnected, with one factor sometimes leading to another. The following sections will provide a detailed examination of these main themes.

The second main theme that emerged from the interviews was the underlying reasons for atheism and deism in IHLs. Participants articulated various, and at times contradictory, explanations. These reasons were organized into five sub-themes: political, youth/age-related, technological, educational, and religious. It is essential to recognize that these categories do not exist in isolation or in opposition to one another. On the contrary, many of them are interconnected, and sometimes one is presented as a result of the other. Each section is substantiated with arguments from the interviews concerning the political reasons. The subsequent sections will delve deeper into these main categories.

6.2.1.2. Political Reasons.

The term "political reasons" is used in this dissertation to describe the reasons for atheism and deism in IHLs that were caused or triggered by politicians directly or indirectly and/or consciously or unconsciously. Over 12 codes were selected and assigned to this theme. Almost all participants mentioned at least half of these codes. The selected codes under this theme are:

- Identifying power and religion

- Religious language in politics
- Politics using authoritarian language
- Politics covering up mistakes with religion
- Politics teaching religion
- Efforts to raise a pious generation
- Religious and unjust governments in the Islamic world
- Increase in the visibility of religion
- Rejecting political identity
- Increase in the number of IHLs
- Increase in the number of IHLs/ coercion
- Encountering/interacting intensively with religion

The relationship between religion and politics was one of the most complex topics in the interviews. In issues like the intertwining of religion, religious education, political language, and the number of IHLs, some respondents felt the tension of speaking on risky topics while still trying to express their thoughts. Some respondents avoided the topic, while others spoke in a veiled manner. These political reasons were grouped under two main headings: the relationship between religious education and politics, and religious government and distrust towards it

6.2.1.2.1. The Relationship Between Religious Education and Politics.

One of the topics that emerged from the interviews, where respondents linked IHL and atheism-deism, was the relationship between religious education and politics. The open support given to IHLs could channel attitudes towards the government and politicians indirectly towards religion. The discussed topics related to this relationship are grouped under these headings: support to IHLs, project schools, reasons for support, and the number of IHLs.

Support to IHLs: Whether IHLs receive more support than other schools is a subject of debate. This support was classified by respondents into categories like discursive support, economic support, and job opportunities after graduation.

According to T10, with the rise of the AKP in the early 2000s, IHLs started to be seen as a tremendous energy source or a raw material to build society, a battery. T10 noted that Erdoğan referred to IHLs at every opportunity: "For example, by stating that he himself is an IHL graduate, he increases its prestige... Or... by saying that IHL graduates should not be timid or hesitant... an IHL graduate can become the President... he imposes a vision and a historical obligation on it" (T10).

IHLs are praised at every level by politicians. Now Türkiye has a President and politicians from IHL backgrounds. Additionally, IHLs are held as moral examples, considered superior to other schools. There is an attempt to assign an identity to IHLs by saying they are 'white', referring to their immaculateness. T16 argued that creating distinctions between schools like this is wrong. If an identity is to be given, it should be done through different means without alienating other schools. T16 also disapproved of sanctifying IHLs by saying nothing bad comes from IHLs.

Many respondents pointed out that the support for IHLs did not start with the AKP. Even before the AKP, parties that conducted politics with religious rhetoric supported IHLs. According to T10, before the February 28 process, during the active political period of the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi) and its leader Erbakan, who conducted politics with religious references, IHLs were seen as institutions that would protect society, direct society, and compensate for losses. Opening IHLs was considered a significant virtue.

However, this support became much more pronounced in the AKP period. T9 provided an example: "I see many things... for instance, someone from the high positions... comes to the school and makes a speech... say... 'This is our field, this is our land.' Now, with this logic,

there is a sense of conquest. We have conquered the state..." (T9). According to another respondent, IHLs have completely deviated from their original purpose: "IHL graduates are rapidly rising in the state hierarchy... and their influence in the state, along with the Directorate of Religious Affairs, has reached its highest level during the AKP period. So much so... that all other high schools are becoming like IHLs... gradually" (T1).

T18, who criticizes politicization of religion, stated that this is mostly done through IHLs: "I wish it would be in the form of reducing the political dominance over religious education" (T18). Some respondents accepted the support, but found an explanation for it. For them, the reason for this praise is that IHLs were obstructed for many years. The aim is to break the fear surrounding IHLs because statements from someone in a high position naturally influence people. However, while doing this, students in other high schools should also be considered, and positive discrimination should not lead to rhetoric or practices that make IHLs much more advantageous.

There were different opinions about the economic support IHLs received. While some respondents noted that IHLs did not receive much more financial support despite being politically praised, others stated that IHLs had better physical conditions compared to other schools. "In recent years, they are somewhat more... favored... there is positive discrimination..." (T3). These good conditions also lead teachers to prefer IHLs. Campaigns offering scholarships to those who send their children to IHLs are organized, and even local authorities are searching families from the neighborhood who send their children to IHLs to offer scholarships.

According to T15, who works at the upper levels of a large association, the economic support to IHLs is not more than other schools. There are many IHLs that request financial support from the association due to being unable to meet their needs. The reason some IHLs seem advantageous is because they are supported by civil society organizations or alumni

associations. That is why these schools have better facilities, not because of the state. This situation is particularly true for successful IHLs.

Job opportunities after graduation are given as another example of political support. While some respondents did not address this issue at all, the group that did not support IHLs claimed that IHL graduates, especially those who continued their education in theology, could easily find jobs in the public sector. They mentioned that those who graduated in theology started working in the Directorate of Religious Affairs and then moved to other institutions. They also noted that IHL and theology graduates worked as psychological counselors in student dormitories or hospitals.

T9, an atheist and an IHL teacher for 30 years, said that wherever he goes in official institutions, he is welcomed with respect because his former students have reached significant positions within the state. He noted that IHL graduates are now at every level and have started to govern the state, adding: "Thanks to this government, job opportunities for IHL graduates have diversified. This diversity makes their work easier in the end... This shows that both money and power have changed hands" (T9).

Project Schools: One of the examples for the biggest support for Imam Hatip High Schools (IHLs) given was the establishment of project IHLs. Supporters of IHLs claimed that these schools are necessary and represent a success story, while opponents argued that they exemplify state discrimination among schools.

Project Imam Hatip schools are specialized IHLs that follow unique curricula in different fields. T2 mentioned seven types of project IHLs: those implementing Science and Social Sciences programs, those with Foreign Language Preparatory and Science programs, those educating Hafiz students (who memorize the Quran), those following Classical/Contemporary Arts programs, those with Sports programs, those with Language programs, and International IHLs. In these schools, students receive specialized courses in their field in addition to religious

courses. They offer high-quality education comparable to top-tier high schools. To accommodate the specialized courses, some religious courses are reduced compared to general IHLs.

These schools are supported by the state in various ways. Some project schools have special academic advisory boards that provide support to both students and teachers. T4 stated that project schools are crucial for the country's future. Their educational load is extremely heavy: "... our social science high schools already have a heavy course load of 30-35 hours, plus about 10 hours of basic theology courses. It's very heavy. This generates discipline... intensive workload from primary school onwards... leads to success. Happiness is another matter... that's separate... but it brings success" (T4).

While the success of these schools is increasing, they are not yet at the level of the country's well-established high schools. T9 noted that project IHLs are preferred by religious and economically upper-class families. Moreover, only project IHLs have the right to open middle schools. No science or social science high schools can open middle schools, and this gives IHLs the advantage of selecting successful students from an early age. "For instance, our school has a middle school section, and all the students are excellent. So what happens? It's a kind of usurpation... First, you select, and then others get the leftovers. Then you select at beginning of high school too... you're always selecting" (T9).

This support raises a critical question: why does the government support IHLs?

Reasons for Support: The reasons for the state's support for these schools vary among respondents. These reasons can be grouped into political/vote-seeking, creating a national identity, and preventing radicalization in religion.

Respondents who see the support as vote-seeking include atheists or religious ones who oppose any state intervention in religion. According to this view, IHL students support the AKP even if they are not religious because maintaining their current living standards depends on it.

Supporting IHLs benefits the government because young people raised in a religious atmosphere are psychologically prepared to vote for a party that is somewhat religious or talks about religion. T1 stated, "The religious culture acquired there (in IHLs) has a significant impact on voting behavior... and... these schools have been officially supported by the government" (T1).

IHLs have also been used as a tool for bureaucrats to advance their careers. "For example, if an appointed governor opens an Imam Hatip in a city... it makes a bright... impression politically... it's not just about opening an Imam Hatip. There is also a benefit that Imam Hatip brings to you. Imam Hatip contributes to your social status" (T10).

Religion's identity-forming feature is another reason appeared in the interviews. The teachings, rituals, and sacred texts of religion create an identity that distinguishes one society from another. The religion taught in IHLs is more about national identity than the moral character religion aims to impart. The goal is to cultivate good citizens who do not complain much about hardships. The ideal citizen, according to the state, is a Muslim, Turk, and Sunni, and IHLs aim to produce this model. This identity automatically influences voting behavior: "Imam Hatip means a place where Muslim, Turkish, and Sunni education is given to young people. When they receive this education, they become ready-made soldiers for the state... ready to die for the state... ready to vote for you" (T1).

T14, who holds a similar view, notes that the first IHLs were established by the founding party of the Republic and that Atatürk emphasized the need for every citizen to acquire literacy, basic arithmetic, and national and religious knowledge. Their aim was not to raise a devout generation but to bring society to a certain level of enlightenment, linking religious nationalism with patriotism. "Imam Hatip is for... keeping citizens as citizens... And religion, in this sense, helps people heal their pains and thus accept things more easily.

Religious education is good because it helps people accept and obey... to create ideal citizens" (T14).

The most frequently mentioned reason for support is that the Islam taught in IHLs prevents radicalization. Without state-provided religious education, untrained individuals and sects would fill the void, leading to significant problems. In IHLs, at least academically trained educators teach religion, preventing it from being left to underground structures. T7, who doesn't trust any other institution for religious education, explained: "Because I know what goes on in these underground places... no one openly says, 'Come, I'll make you a good terrorist.' They say, 'Come, I'll teach you the Quran,' and then the process evolves... State religious education prevents sects from using religion for bad purposes. IHL prevents religious exploitation, especially among young people... because they are very open to manipulation. Those radical groups... their radical discourses... usually become very popular among young people " (T7).

Sects are hostile to IHLs because they want religious education entirely under their control. They aim to create a parallel education system, which would eventually lead to a parallel public sphere. T18 argued that this is why IHLs are valuable: "... Let children receive solid, authentic religious education integrated with the values of this republic. No Imam Hatip graduate has ever pointed a gun at the state. None! See... this is really valuable" (T18).

T10 believes that the historical reason for establishing and promoting IHLs is to act as a brake against extremism: "Despite everything, they (IHL graduates) have a sufficient understanding of religious matters. Religion will come through them. They won't establish a religious state or have an expectation of an Islamic regime. However, they will take a stand against non-Islamic outputs of the system... They take a stand against un-Islamic attitudes" (T10). At the same time, the state does not want IHLs themselves to radicalize and prevent the emergence of extreme thoughts.

By opening and supporting IHLs to teach state-approved religion, the state prevents young people from learning religion from sects and communities. IHLs teach a moderate religion without extremism. With many teachers providing religious education, students encounter different religious interpretations and see that various interpretations can coexist peacefully.

T13, who believes religion is a civil matter and should not be taught by the state, acknowledges that there is no other solution. "If we have to choose between two evils... I say the lesser evil because... unfortunately... we don't have a prophet among us... since there is no absolute authority we can obey, every sect, every institution produces its version, leading to bigger problems. So..." (T13). T11 described what would happen if the state withdrew its support for religious education: "If the state pulls out... What happens in Turkey? Sects and communities would clash. Chaos... everyone claiming their way is the best... even now, some sects don't like IHLs or theology faculties. Imagine if the state withdrew completely... chaos" (T11). In such a scenario, most of the respondents agreed that Turkey's situation could resemble Afghanistan, where each sect has its education system, resulting in mutual hostility. "Imam Hatip high schools were established to represent the middle way between extremes" (T6).

IHLs have a transparent curriculum accessible to everyone. Additionally, students take social and science courses alongside religious studies. These diverse subjects foster a process of inquiry and analysis, protecting young people from sects. Thus, T15 sees IHLs as the country's safeguard: "IHL is a safeguard because... religion is one of the most influential institutions in shaping societies... since the existence of humanity. If religious education is not provided healthily, it can lead to serious deviant movements like ISIS. So... religious education should be transparent, in peace with some classical sources... and integrated with the world. And this can only be done through official institutions accessible to everyone. That's why I

think Imam Hatip and the religious education provided there are... an advantage and a safeguard for society" (T15).

T18 provided an example of how IHL prevents radicalization. A delegation from Pakistan, where there are over 20,000 madrassas, came to study how to establish an IHL-like school there, as madrassas sometimes even bomb each other's mosques. IHL was accepted as a good and working example of fighting against radicalism. He said: "Religion is very prone to radicalization. All ideologies are, but religion more so. Normally, an atheist wouldn't kill someone if asked... Why he will do? But a religious person might do it for the sake of God. Kills and waits a reward! That's why Imam Hatip is a safeguard in this sense" (T18).

Number of Imam Hatip Schools: This political support for IHLs led to changes in the number of IHL buildings and students. Under the AKP government, especially after 2012, the increase in IHL buildings and student numbers, supported by the government, became one of the most contentious topics in the interviews. One group of respondents argued that there was no increase in the number of IHLs and that any changes were a result of a natural process. T3 stated that this increase was not entirely a result of Erdoğan's rhetoric about raising a "pious generation." Although partially connected, he argued that it would have happened naturally as well. The IHL ratio, which dropped from 11-12% to 2-3% during the February 28 process, would have increased anyway once the February 28 decisions were overturned under the AKP government. "IHLs have reached their natural limit. I think this ratio will peak around 13%. It's hard to predict the future, but at least we can see that... there's no longer a leap like... in 2012 or 2013" (T3).

In recent years, this increase has fluctuated between 13-14% of all high schools. T7 commented: "There was a segment that wanted IHLs, and they were blocked... This blocked segment wanted their rights back and wanted to enroll their children there" (T7). T15 attributed the increase to the overall rise in student numbers and the involvement of NGOs, not just public

resources, in establishing IHLs. T3 noted that it was legitimate for the government to open IHLs, and no one was forced to attend them.

T9 pointed out that in some cities or districts, the number of IHLs equaled or outnumbered regular high schools: "In some places, there is one regular school for every three IHLs. Or the numbers are equal... What are you doing! The majority normally goes to the general schools. A minority, about 15-20%, will go to IHLs. When you make IHLs equal to regular schools... the majority will attend the regular ones... But what happens if you make it 50-50? Kids are left without options. And what they do? They are forced to attend the IHL" (T9).

Respondents who claimed that the increase in numbers was due to government support also argued that the rising numbers and the exam system sometimes left families and students with no other school options. This situation forced families to look for alternatives: "The number of IHL students increased significantly... people started going there because they couldn't find other schools. Families with some financial means sent their children to private schools because they couldn't find other options. Those who couldn't afford it had to send their children to the neighborhood IHL" (T17). T9 mentioned that students did not attend IHLs willingly and sometimes an entire class was there by necessity: "I entered a 9th-grade class, opened the door... asked the 25-30 male students if they would like to stay if given a choice to attend any school they wanted. Ask them to raise hand if they want to stay... Not a single student raised their hand" (T9).

Respondents who believed the number of IHLs increased linked this to the increase in atheism-deism in different ways. The first was students' refusal to listen to religious lessons. According to T7, some students did not want to be there and were not focused on the lessons, especially the religious ones. Respondents who noted a decrease in quality as the number of IHLs increased believed this was inevitable: "Quantity and quality don't always go hand in

hand. When quality increases, it usually decreases as it expands" (T3). Another consequence was students' alienation from religion due to intensive exposure to religious knowledge.

T17 explained that students who wouldn't have encountered religion so intensely in other schools began questioning their beliefs because of the IHL experience: "If they hadn't come to an IHL... they might not have encountered something that would challenge and provoke them. They might have lived their lives without questioning... and grown up to be a standard Turkish man. But by forcing them to IHL.. maybe... they have been pushed into questioning. And we end up seeing students who leave IHL and abandon their faith" (T17).

T1 emphasized the negative impact of this exposure, noting that while the same religious knowledge was taught in IHLs before, it became more widespread and mainstream under this government: "It used to be more isolated and less influential. But now it's spreading everywhere, becoming dominant... and we are heading towards the idea that this is the only correct way" (T1). Regarding this increase and channeling students into IHLs, T9 remarked: "Just as all mortals will taste death, all students will taste religious education. (by laughing)" (T9).

One of the most important topics related to the connection between religious education and politics in recent years was the conversion of general high schools into IHLs. Even those who viewed IHLs positively argued that converting existing schools was a mistake. According to T3, converting a school in a neighborhood where children had attended for many years to an IHL created significant backlash. T3 noted that these reactions were not ideologically motivated and needed to be understood: "Imagine... I graduated from a certain Anatolian high school and I still live in the neighborhood. Then I see the school sign has changed! This can cause emotional reactions... and we need to understand this" (T3).

T16 acknowledged wrong practices in school conversions but said they were isolated cases: "There were those who forcibly turned schools into IHLs without considering the needs

of the area and tried to create demand. But these IHLs have been converted back to regular schools... Everything returned to its essence" (T16). However, T1 viewed the conversions not as isolated mistakes but as a deliberate action: "According to AKP's future projection, all high schools should be like IHLs. IHLs should not only train imams, muezzins, and religious officials but should be schools that train the average Turkish youth. In other words, an average Turkish high school graduate should be like an IHL graduate... having received religious education" (T1).

T8, holding similar views, stated that they saw reflections of AKP's worldview in the entire education system, especially with the 4+4+4 system that introduced religious education into all schools. He noted that in some cities, there was only one health vocational high school compared to around 1000 middle and high-level IHLs: "If there is more need for IHLs than health vocational high schools, there is a problem with how religion is taught and explained" (T8).

The first example T8 gave of the increased religiosity in education was the protocols signed between the Ministry of National Education and religious communities. T8 argued that education is a public service and should be provided exclusively by the state, and the right to education cannot be delegated. Another example was the schools T8 visited as a member of an educational union, where he noted that school buildings were becoming more like places of worship, with even primary school walls covered in Arabic verses: "School bulletin boards are filled with religious content. For example, one says those who do not pray are infidels. Not just IHLs but regular schools are like this too. In every school, it's the same picture. In recent years, education has been given based on Islamic values. Value education is persistently carried out through Islamic values, and even in class door decorations, there are always images of veiled children, never uncovered ones" (T8).

T9 gave similar examples, describing how the education system was becoming more religious and that this was done deliberately: "For example, with headscarves... last year, regarding the graphics in textbooks... all the negative figures were unveiled, while all the positive ones were veiled. Two years ago, this happened in our school with door decorations introducing professions. All the professional men were bearded, and all the women were veiled. But in one case, in the psychology class door decoration, the patient was blonde and unveiled, while the doctor was veiled" (T9).

6.2.1.2.2. Religious Government and Distrust Towards It.

The identification of the AKP government with religion and its use of religious language in politics is cited as another reason for the increase in anti-religious sentiments among IHL students. In this context, the following sections will examine: the religious language of politics, increased visibility of religion, and the discourse of a pious generation.

The Religious Language of Politics: More than half of the respondents, regardless of their worldview, claimed that the political power employs a religious and/or conservative language. T9 highlighted the impact of religious discourse on people, noting that the conservative segment has discovered, as Karl Marx said, that "religion is the opium of the people." T5 emphasized the political function of religion, arguing that it is a crucial apparatus for governing people and that political parties aiming to come to power should not be anti-religion. He stated, "It's not just about being religious. To win the hearts of the people, they need to strengthen religious rhetoric. When politicians emphasize religious rhetoric and come to power, it appears as though the populace becomes more religious. This is a false religiosity."

T1 emphasized that the government fully identifies itself with religion and warned that if the AKP stays in power for much longer, criticizing the government will be perceived as directly opposing religion. "We face a future where saying something negative about Tayyip Erdoğan might be equated with questioning Allah or the Prophet... Are you in denial or are

you an infidel? Those will come together because... in such religious dictatorships, things inevitably go that way." (T1).

T18 discussed that god-centered problems such as deism, atheism or agnosticism have a theological leg and a political leg, and both are linked. He noted that the language of religion used by the Directorate of Religious Affairs or theology faculties is often authoritarian and adjusted according to political needs, as politics uses religion as a means of persuasion. This authoritarian religious language inevitably triggers reactions and fosters tendencies toward deism, atheism, and agnosticism.

T16, who stated that politics has a religious and conservative language, noted the risks of this approach: "If you have religious and conservative rhetoric, any political mistake you make can be attributed to religion. Politics is such that... especially today... What is politics today? Today say it's good this should be here, and tomorrow there (he changed the place of some small items on his table to demonstrate what he was saying). You will be politically successful based on persuading people that today's decisions are right. This is the essence of politics. Now... If you include religious language in your daily political rhetoric, any mistakes you make will be attributed to religion."

Respondents who highlighted the attribution of individual errors to religion linked this to the high expectations placed on religious people. T18 explained, "So... People expected that a religious person... If we go 20-25 years ago... before AKP... People were waiting religious persons to come to power... someone who prays and is devout, would do a good job. And they were right to expect that. It's true, religious person should not do wrong. But when they see that such a person fails, they start questioning the religion itself... they say we were wrong about it."

A significant distrust towards religion has emerged not only among IHL students but also among the general public. In the 90s, people trusted religious individuals and elevated them to power. However, as the religious came into power and failed the test, they caused a

severe loss of trust. T13 stated, "They seriously damaged people's trust in religion and their hopes in religious people."

Some respondents also mentioned that every negative aspect was attributed to the government. Since the government identified itself with religion, it tarnished the image of religion alongside its own. However, they emphasized that blaming religion for everything is incorrect, and a distinction should be made between religion and religious people. They argued that if all mistakes were attributed to religion, no religion in the world would survive. T18 suggested, "To protect religion from such issues, there should be some distance between the state and religion."

Respondents noted that the religious rhetoric and bad examples in politics particularly affected those who are educated in religion, and the visibility of these examples increased through social media. T17 mentioned that politics not only uses religious rhetoric but also uses it to cover up its mistakes, which gradually alienates young people from religion. Hence, the loss of trust in a religious government also led to a loss of trust in religion itself.

Increased Visibility of Religion: Five respondents mentioned the increased visibility of religion as a reason for distancing from it. This increase was directly linked to politics. T12 argued that the visibility of religiosity is not about an increase in number or quality but rather a result of people appearing religious to benefit from the opportunities provided by the government. He claimed that there is even a decline in quality and quantity while an increase in visibility. One example given for this increase was the loudness of the call to prayer (azan). T17 noted that religion has become so ingrained in daily life that even religious people are bothered by the volume of the call to prayer. "Even people who walk around saying 'Alhamdulillah, I'm Muslim' now react to the loud call to prayer because it's so loud. In 2002, when the AKP came to power, they limited it to 60 decibels. They set this rule themselves. But now, it's almost 120 decibels."

In addition to the state supporting institutional religion for political purposes, the religionization of institutions can also lead individuals to distance themselves from religion. Two respondents who identified as religious mentioned that they had spoken with atheists. According to these respondents, the atheists claimed that only 10% of the atheists in the country were made atheists by themselves, while the remaining 90% were directed towards atheism due to religious policies by the government. The increase in institutional religion made religion more visible.

The excessive visibility of religious symbols led to a reactive distancing from religion. The political power's effort to increase the visibility of religion in the public sphere is perceived as an intrusion into private life, and caused some people who do not like this to distance themselves from religion. T5 described this as reactive secularization, stating, "In Turkey... the rulers said... like... 'Have three children, have five children,' 'My example is the Prophet Muhammad,' 'We will raise a pious generation,' 'We will increase the number of Imam Hatip schools,' and 'Isn't it a shame not to marry until you're 30?'... all these led people engaging in premarital sex until they are 40. This is reactive secularization."

The issue of elective religious courses in general middle and high schools was the most frequently mentioned topic concerning reactions to personal or private life choices. Although it is a topic outside of IHLs, it is worth mentioning as a subtopic because it affects the right to choose in education and causes reactions.

Elective religious courses are additional elective courses⁶ added to the curriculum, apart from the mandatory religious courses in general primary and secondary education. While respondents supporting these courses argued that students can choose religious courses from among many electives, those against them labeled these courses as "elective-compulsory." They claimed that, in practice, students are forced to choose religious courses because teachers

⁶ These elective religion courses are the Holy Quran, the Life of our Prophet and Basic Religious Knowledge.

for other elective courses are not available. T5 expressed his frustration, saying, "It's called elective but it's mandatory. They give students a list of 10 elective courses and direct them to these two, saying there are no teachers for the other eight. Is this not a disgrace? This situation is happening all over Turkey. Don't get me started."

Some respondents noted that not only IHLs but all educational institutions provide religious education, and this is demanded by higher authorities. T9 mentioned, "Sometimes, directives come from the ministry or parliament, sometimes openly, sometimes secretly, telling schools to encourage certain elective courses. As a result, parents feel compelled to choose these so-called elective but actually mandatory religious courses."

Respondents highlighted that students are often forced into specific courses due to the lack of teachers for other electives. T8 mentioned that sometimes entire elective courses consist of religious content and that parents are pressured to choose these courses through advertisements on billboards. He claimed, "Social pressure has reached its peak, and now children in schools are adopting a language that marginalizes and ostracizes each other. We are in schools. Let me put it this way: if you don't choose the course on the life of the Prophet Muhammad or the Quran, but choose another course instead, you're ostracized. You're the other." (T8).

The Discourse of a Pious Generation: Erdoğan's statement, "We will raise a pious generation," was interpreted by the respondents in various ways. Some saw it as one of the reasons for the religionization of education, while others emphasized that the current IHLs did not have such capacity. Some respondents, though finding the statement well-intentioned, claimed that the implementations actually drove people away from religion.

T2 defined a pious generation as one that performs good deeds, working not for personal gain but for the benefit of all humanity. A pious generation is one that carries a concern in everything it does. "It is a generation that carries the worry: Am I doing something wrong,

something that is inconsistent with Allah's will?" (T13). According to T4, the only legal means to raise a pious generation is through IHLs, and whether this will succeed remains to be seen.

While T4 has this expectation from IHLs, T3 argued that expecting a pious generation from IHLs is contrary to the nature of things. T14 stated that those advocating for a pious generation do not actually aim to raise such a generation. "For example, taking Mr. President's statement about raising a pious generation... if it were to be a pious generation, according to his view, what is he talking about? ... in this system, he means someone who votes for his party, lives like him, and thinks like him. This religiosity is not the essence of religion. Therefore, there is no point in that statement of a pious generation. It is a contradictory statement" (T14).

T18 stated that the discourse of raising a pious generation has no bad intentions, as, from a pious person's perspective, religiosity is a positive definition. This claim is supported by pious people. However, the fact that communities and sects (cemaat) have different definitions of religiosity led to the perception that this discourse interferes with freedom. Political rhetoric did not consider what implementing this would entail, but this discourse could be seen as an attempt to define and shape people, to bring them into line. "From the moment it came out of the mouth, it has been transformed. When religiosity comes out of the mouth of a person who governs the state, it becomes the duty of the YÖK (Council of Higher Education), for example... how can I ensure this religiosity through theologians? How can I ensure it through Imam Hatips? They take it as their duty and shape the curricula to increase religiosity, for example... let's increase Quran lessons. They did it, did they do it? They did it, they did... Therefore, the aim of the political discourse and what the institutions deriving their duty from it did worked in the opposite direction in Turkey. It worked in the opposite direction... and gave an opposite result" (T18).

T8 claimed that such political discourses had counterproductive results, and that religious pressures increased the need for secularism, and freedom of conscience and religion

to 60% compared to before 2000. "Therefore, this is also the success (!) of the political power; we only understood how essential and needed secularism is. People want what they need. There was no need yesterday, but there is more need today" (T8). Additionally, these policies triggered deism and atheism. According to T8, the Ministry of National Education conducted a survey in IHLs and found that more than 50% identified as atheist, but they hid this survey from the public.

The use of religious language by the ruling party in politics, while rejecting its political identity, also led to the rejection of the religious identity and symbols associated with that identity. T18 cited the headscarf as an example. The general perception that wearing a headscarf is associated with being an AKP supporter led to distancing from the headscarf to distance oneself from that political identity. "In recent times, you know... there has also been an increase in people who remove their headscarves. Yes, for example... let's say... when someone identifies themselves as part of a group by wearing a headscarf, they say you are one of them. And... they want to get rid of that identity... In Imam Hatips, for example, you have a perception about women or human being... If that perception is very negative, a bad perception, they don't want to be part of that perception" (T18).

Corruption claims and/or sudden wealth among bureaucrats or party members associated with public institutions using religious rhetoric make devout people distance themselves from both religion and politics. Many respondents noted that this is not only happening among adults but also among IHL students, who see these issues and are even more affected by them due to their better knowledge of religion, leading them to atheism or deism.

In summary, nearly all respondents emphasized that the notable presence of atheism and deism in the country, particularly among IHL students, was not the result of a deliberate intellectual inquiry but rather a reactionary stance. Political reasons emerged as one of the most

important causes of this reaction. Politicians' inconsistency between their religious rhetoric and actions leads young people to reject both.

T9 made a striking statement on this issue: "I don't think atheism is a conscious process. It is not a result of questioning... It is more like this... If they are deists, if being deist is something we should be pleased with, we should thank Erdoğan for it... see... they say yes, I believe too, there is a God, a creator...but... There was a Muslim Englishman who learned Islam by reading the Quran... I am glad I learned Islam by reading the Quran. If I had learned from Muslims, I wouldn't have become a Muslim. This is a bit of what the Imam Hatip youth living in our country experiences... They look at their teachers, looks at the government and asks, 'Hey dude! Which one is Islam?' And eventually, they realize that they have been deceived, that it was a scam, and their faith starts to weaken" (T9).

6.2.1.3. The Youth Factors.

The second category under the title of reasons for atheism and deism is reasons related to age and family: The Youth Factors. I have gathered themes related to youth and family, such as the age of doubt in youth, adolescent psychology, questioning and protesting, being influenced by bad examples, conflict with parents, and family pressure under this title. Thus, the reasons triggering atheism-deism related to youth and family have formed the youth reasons category. Almost 20 codes were selected and assigned to this theme, with half of the participants mentioning at least five of these codes. The selected codes under this theme are:

- Protesting / Questioning
- Observing contradictions among religious people
- Noticing inconsistency in adults
- Feeling disappointed by religious people
- Encountering negative religious examples
- Increased visibility of bad examples

- Reacting to the moral understanding of religious individuals
- Desiring to live according to one's whims (heva)
- Finding religious rules too demanding
- Becoming accustomed to comfort
- Adolescent psychology
- Age of doubt / Age of religious doubt
- Individualization
- Family pressure (religion and school-IHL)
- Experiencing conflicts with parents
- Communication problems (parent-teacher-child)
- Traumatic experiences
- Struggling with trust issues
- Questioning authority
- Reacting to authority (political, religious, family)
- Identity issues/confusion

The link between the age of IHL students, their relationship with their families and their psychology, and atheism-deism tendencies was not a contradictory topic among the respondents. Mostly, they agreed that the age of adolescence may—and should—lead to questioning authority, clashing with parents, and becoming more individual. They referred to the questioning and reactions brought by this stage of life. They mentioned that students at that age, regardless of the type of high school, naturally question everything and everyone around them and look at values and beliefs with suspicion. Additionally, they stated that growing up in comfort in today's conditions also leads to distancing from religion and religious rules.

Discussing the topics related to the codes above was not an issue. There was no hesitation in mentioning the reasons related to age. These reasons are divided into four main

titles: age of doubt and questioning, negative religious examples, increasing prosperity and difficulty of religious rules, family pressure.

6.2.1.3.1. Age of Doubt and Questioning.

One of the topics that nearly all participants agreed on was that questioning and doubt were due to the age of the students. When we talked about IHL students, we were talking about young people. "The youth period is a tricky age both psychologically and sociologically... and it was... throughout history" (T16). Therefore, according to T12, a religious psychologist, it is natural for young people to question religion, and even to lean towards atheism-deism. As a result, they may also break away from religion, but this is a process. A young person's religious attitude is not clear before the age of 21-22. The important thing is to manage this process correctly, and if this is done, it will lead the young person to a conscious belief. For someone who knows the age of religious doubt and the adolescence process, this process is not surprising.

The child who has unquestioningly believed in their parents and teachers becomes confused during this period and starts to question what they have learned. They start to discuss among themselves whether there is a creator, whether heaven and hell exist. According to T11, this is natural but temporary. It is the age of doubt, and it needs to be experienced. It existed in the past too, but young people were afraid to express it; today, however, they express it more easily. "Every young person experience this; some experience it internally and cannot reflect it outwardly because they are afraid... others openly discuss it. Today... some people label this as atheism, but it is not" (T11). For some respondents, we all have similar questions in our minds, but it is not always easy to express them. "In the past, there was no courage to ask in the given environment. But the current environment allows for this a bit more... they can ask" (T13).

The reason why it is easier to talk about these things today is due to easy access to all kinds of information through social media and the presence of academically successful IHL students. Otherwise, these questions have always existed. Agreeing with other respondents, T16 said: "There is an age of religious doubt. They doubt religion... in fact, there are Islamic scholars who emphasize that this religious doubt is necessary, with Ghazali being one of them" (T16). These questions need to be asked because the young person's consciousness is in a constant state of construction. The most important thing is to provide the correct information.

According to T14, the problem is not these questions but actually not questioning, and modern man has lost this trait. "We don't question... in this sense, I think it is very blessed for children to question if there are still children who do so. Very few children question, and very few children actually engage with questions outside of their peers' interests..." (T14). In fact, the number of young people questioning is low, and their asking questions is an opportunity. "Therefore, this questioning period in adolescence is actually an opportunity for a person to substantiate what they believe in. So, I don't completely find it wrong to ask these questions" (T13).

Another factor seen as a requirement of age is individualization and distrust and opposition to authority. T12 was the most detailed participant on this topic. According to him, the logic behind deism's emergence is the distrust of the authority of adults and institutions, that is, making room for direct communication with God. A young person who does not trust adults, parents, mosque teachers, or religion teachers tends to lean towards deism if they cannot go towards atheism. Young people no longer accept the type of religiosity that develops under a social council because they do not want a religion inherited from their parents. They look more critically and want to understand. Because they are individualizing. "They don't want to live according to the minds of others. They don't want to believe as others believe... They don't want to accept intermediaries for establishing a connection with the entity they believe in...

and... they don't want to follow others' instructions. But... want to sustain their belief within a framework created in their own minds... We can say there is such a tendency" (T12).

To substantiate their individuality and prove their personality, they reject the religious knowledge received at school, citing the contradictions, mistakes, or inadequacies of religious people. Respondents who support IHLs emphasized that during this period, it is important to provide sources that will convince the young person, and this way, they will return to religion more consciously. However, if adults use authority and criticize questioning, the young person will react. Because at that age, the most reacted thing is the authority of parents or teachers. Therefore, it is necessary to address them as independent individuals and talk to them, and only this way can they be convinced.

6.2.1.3.2. Negative Religious Examples.

Another factor explaining the atheism-deism tendencies of IHL students in relation to their age is their greater susceptibility to negative religious examples. According to the respondents, young people who learn religious rules at school but observe behaviors in religious adults that do not comply with these rules may distance themselves from religion. They can attribute the mistakes of people who bear religious symbols to religion itself, thus merging the concepts of religion and religious individuals.

The interviews revealed that this tendency to merge the individual with religion encompasses not only political figures but all adults known to the youth in any capacity. According to T12, young people are very sensitive in this regard, but merging the individual with religion is a misjudgment because religion is an independent truth. "Children and young people are not yet intellectually capable of evaluating these beliefs and values on their own. Therefore... the most important reference for them is living examples. They have an innate idealism. No matter how flawed they are... they want to see ideal examples before them... because... they need this to complete their personalities" (T12).

One societal example cited as causing young people to lose faith and trust in religion was the use of violence by religious communities both domestically and abroad. The July 15 coup attempt⁷ by a group known for its religiosity was mentioned by almost all respondents. Internationally, examples like ISIS and the Taliban also led young people to question religion. "Consider the youth from 2010 onwards. Let's say a child who was 12 years old in 2013 is now 19 years old. They grew up seeing these narratives. Groups like FETÖ, Orthodox Islamists... their religious language... interpretation... at each other's throats! Naturally, the child says, 'I don't want anything to do with this... even if they are an IHL student!'" (T16). According to T9, July 15 marked the collapse of political Islam in Turkey, and people no longer trust religious discourses because they have seen where the state, in collaboration with communities (cemaatler), leads. In fact, for most of the respondents, this situation has affected not only young people but the entire society's perception of religion. "There are significant changes in this society... During the February 28 process, people were chanting for Sharia in schools. Now, we don't even hear about Sharia. They used to sing hymns; now we don't hear any hymns" (T9).

The association of religious people with power and their unjust exploitation of it was also mentioned as a negative example in the interviews. The damage caused by religious people benefiting from the privileges provided by power was attributed to religion. The concept frequently mentioned here was "Hypocritical religiosity⁸." The transformation of material wealth brought by power into a lavish lifestyle led people, especially young students, to question the source and means of obtaining this wealth.

However, respondents who did not see the negative influence on young people as innocent noted that the young people chose what suited them. They argued that while an

⁷ For more information: <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/activities/15july/>

⁸ "Hypocritical religiosity, a style of religious behavior, is the opposite of sincere religiosity. It states displaying religiousness and hypocrisy in religiosity" Okumuş, Ejder. "Gösterişçi Dindarlık". *Dinbilimleri Akademik Araştırma Dergisi* 6/3 (Haziran 2006), 17-35

atheist's mistake does not prevent them from being an atheist, a religious person's mistake leads to this outcome, which implies a choice. Those who did not share this view defined the expectation for a religious person to commit fewer sins as a natural expectation. "... the disappointment here did shake people's trust in religion... we have to admit that. ... Young people see these issues and react. They may not care much about a corrupt Atatürkist, but when a religious person does it... because religion is something completely different, not like an ideology. A religious person, like someone wearing white clothes, shows stains more clearly... like milk... actually, it is not like that... not like wearing white. But this is inevitably so. I don't think we have passed a very good test. When encountering many opportunities related to money and power, the test was not passed well" (T13).

Negative examples mentioned by four non-religious respondents were not just related to money. They also pointed out that the criminal and moral understanding of religious people alienated young people from religion. The way harassment and rape cases were handled and the perspectives on these cases pushed not only young people but also adults towards reactive atheism. "For example, there was that foundation incident... the XXX Foundation case, it disgusted so many people that I know people who canceled their XXX lines just because XXX supported them. Such things can push people away. At some point, people say, 'You can't be this despicable'" (T17)⁹.

Almost half of the respondents, who generally identified as religious themselves, added that such a merging of the individual with religion is wrong and must be approached fairly, as an immoral person might appear religious to gain favor with power. Therefore, not every wrongdoing should be attributed to religion. According to T13, the sanctity attributed to religion raises expectations from it, so a secular person committing corruption does not attract

⁹ The 'XXX' markings represent redacted identifiers to preserve anonymity. No material information has been omitted.

as much attention as a religious person. Therefore, it must be explained that religion does not approve of these behaviors and that the problem lies in the character of those individuals, not in religion. T12 mentioned that while the visibility of these negative examples has increased, positive examples do not seek visibility, hence young people do not see them. Young people mostly see those who "appear" religious and judge based on that.

6.2.1.3.3. Increasing Prosperity and Difficulty of Religious Rules.

The rising prosperity of religious communities in recent years, and the accessibility of many forms of entertainment have also emerged as prominent reasons. According to the respondents, IHL students are not exempt from this and are as affected as young people in other high schools. Economic comfort brings with it a desire to live limitlessly and without rules, to enjoy life. In such a situation, young people either do not want to see moral and religious rules or, aware of these religious rules, look for ways to interpret them differently.

According to T13, who noted that it is naturally difficult for young people offered a comfortable life to perform prayers five times a day, young people use other factors as excuses and actually do not want to compromise on their comfort: "We have raised such a hedonistic, selfish, and sacrifice-averse generation... a child who has grown up in a heated apartment, taken heated buses to a heated school, has never felt the burning heat of the sun... or the cold... Now, when you tell this child to take ablution in the cold... when they don't want to take ablution and use excuses like 'those people are stealing money in tenders, so why should I... there may be other factors. They may present it as an excuse, a front" (T13).

T16, who does not see the political or social reasons for young people's atheism-deism tendencies as innocent, said that living religiously is hard, while the world is sweet. Today, religious people have money, and sins are more accessible for them. Worldly pleasures appeal more to young people, and they look for excuses to abandon religion. "We look for reasons and load them onto certain religious typologies. My teacher at the Quran course beat me... my

father beat me with a hose... someone else committed corruption, another committed child abuse... and so on. Thus, we distance ourselves from or move away from religion. But the truth is, we want to give in to our desires... The high school or university-aged child says, 'I want to have a girlfriend,' or the girl says, 'I want to have a boyfriend.' ... And this religious dimension bothers the child. If they think about it constantly, it bothers them. So, when they shake it off, they feel relieved" (T16).

Some respondents, who noted that a hedonistic generation does not want to lower their standards for the sake of God and finds it difficult, stated that young people living in such comfort and self-centeredness cannot become religious just because they receive an IHL education. Others, however, empathized with the young people, saying that religious rules are difficult and today's youth cannot accept them. According to T1, young people learning that having fun, singing, or listening to music is considered sinful and the work of Satan in the religious rules taught at IHL, start to question: "This child learning religion starts to question. 'What is this?' they say, 'Is there such a thing in Islam?' They want to talk to their girlfriend, 'It's forbidden, you can't talk. You can't hold hands, it's forbidden. Why? Because that's what they read. This, for example, is an obstacle in their daily life. They should be freer, they should be more relaxed. They say, 'Is there such a thing in Islam? It can't be. What does it mean?... If you say these are sins, don't do them, young people have to exclude you, this religion. At least most young people..." (T1).

According to T7, there are too many rules in Islam, and if these rules are not made appealing to the young, they cause a reaction. Young people do not want people constantly interfering with their lives, clothes, food, marriages, and friendships. The IHL student also sees that these rules do not exist in the nearby schools. They see their peers living as they wish. "There is a young person who dresses and acts as they please. Here, a young person is suffocating in rules" (T7). T7, who has spoken with students who identify as atheists or deists

in IHL, sees that the issue is actually the difficulty of adhering to religious rules. To support his view, he said that young people find it easier to say they are deists rather than atheists because it is difficult to leave religion altogether, but easier to adopt the idea of a creator who does not interfere with their lives. The general irresponsibility towards life also reflects in their religious lives. This becomes more evident in IHL because there is an expectation for students to follow religious rules.

6.2.1.3.4. Family Pressure.

One of the reasons for the atheist-deist tendencies among young people is the pressure they experience from their families. This pressure was defined in two ways: firstly, being forced to attend IHLs, and secondly, being pressured to adhere to religious rules.

Those who become atheists or deists in their adult or young age often experience extreme religious pressure during their childhood. Excessive and unnecessary pressure from parents or the neighborhood mosque's imam in the name of religion has driven them away from faith. T11 said these individuals present themselves as atheists or irreligious, but in reality, they are not irreligious but rather reacting against it. T18 provided examples of such pressures: "You wake up in the morning, and they tell you to pray. Okay... to a 7-year-old child. If they don't wake up, you tell them 1-2 times, and if it doesn't work, you beat them! Hey! How can you beat a 7-year-old? Seven! In a place where there's religion and faith... supposed to be communication... where is the language? Now, if you beat them, they will store it away. Years later, they will beat you back in a different way" (T18).

According to T7, claiming to be atheist and deist is a way for a young person who has been forced to pray or follow any religious rule by their parents to show their reaction. "... how can they hurt them (the family) the most to punish them? Declaring themselves as atheists hurts their parents more than even their own death would" (T7). Besides becoming atheist and deist, young people can react to family pressure in different ways. For instance, a young woman

forced to wear a headscarf might wear it but show her reaction through her behavior. "...for example, I see more excessive makeup among covered women. This is an expression... a psychological problem actually. It's an effort to show something. Like, they can't do normal makeup. They can't dress normally. They go to more exaggerated things. Maybe different psychological objections are developing due to things being imposed on them" (T7).

The religious pressure from families on young people can also manifest as preventing them from questioning religion. During the age of religious doubt, parents can prevent their children from asking questions. In this case, the most important thing is how religion is explained, the language of religion. Young people who cannot question their parents or are dictated rules without explanations see/use atheism and deism as a way to escape or react/punish. "But here... even if one person leans towards this tendency... it obliges us to sit down and review how we interpret, understand, and explain religion, the language we use to convey it. Diyanet, theology departments, etc. Because religion is about seeking attachment and a safe harbor. Those arguments about the existence of God are just about tying to that harbor with tighter ropes" (T18).

Being forced to attend IHLs is another reason for atheist-deist tendencies. In addition to the intense exposure to religion mentioned earlier, here it emerges that the young person reacts to the religion they associate with IHLs because they were forced to attend. Many graduates who come to the Atheist Association were sent to IHLs against their will. Conflicts over IHL preferences between family and child are common. The child doesn't want the IHL because they don't want to be restricted, while the family chooses it for its safety. Additionally, students find IHL classes heavier and more difficult. They particularly resist religious lessons as a form of reaction. "...for example, they say they don't want to listen to the Quran class... Why? Because the Quran is in the IHL, and the IHL is the school their parents sent them to,

and since they have conflicts with their parents, they also have conflicts with the Quran..." (T7).

The inability of parents to establish appropriate and adequate communication with their children, lacking these skills, emerges as a reason for problems in teaching religion and school selection processes. A leading cause of communication breakdown is the rapid development of communication technology and the lack of knowledge and equipment among families in this area. This new communication culture and language teach certain habits to the child, which adults cannot keep up with. Therefore, adults who lack the technical means to direct the young person's language and culture towards the desired goal cannot enter the child's world and try to educate the young person in their own way, with their own habits. "But most parents and teachers cannot use a language that can reach the child. They cannot enter their lives... If they can't enter... then how can effective teaching and education be? If you can't enter the child's life, you can't shape them within your beliefs. Then they create other worlds for themselves... they take other examples and models. This is very natural" (T12). In this situation, the young person cannot find a ready identity they feel they belong to in society and begins to search for it.

The question of why families sometimes prefer IHLs even if the young person doesn't want to come here. Almost all interviewees mentioned religious education as the first reason, not related to acquiring a profession like becoming an imam or Quran course instructor. They want their children to know their religion, and then go to any university they want, do any job they want. "The citizen says... my child... before I die, with one foot in the grave... I don't want them to abandon me to a nursing home, if they know their religion and faith, they won't do that. That's exactly it" (T14).

Even if parents are religious, they cannot regularly and systematically convey religious knowledge to the child, and IHL provides this. The aim of making the child an imam was never

mentioned among family preferences. According to T11, if the goal were to become an imam, female students would not attend IHLs, as women cannot be imams according to religion. But they can work in every other field, or if not, they can become housewives who know their religion and raise their children. "...my daughter or son... at least learn to read the Quran a bit, and then... when I die... at least recite Al-Fatiha for me" (11).

Moral concerns are another reason that comes to the fore. Especially for girls, families send them to IHLs for this reason. Many IHLs do not offer co-education. "For example, a parent comes and says: when I leave my child through this door, I am at peace until I pick them up again... because they know that when the students enter through that door... we take care of them and teach them good things" (7). Another interviewee, who claimed they raise moral and respectful individuals, noted that even the most unsuccessful and naughty students are much more respectful than their peers in other high schools. Thus, school culture also plays a dominant role here. Families don't raise young people; school and environment, and peer relationships do. "Therefore, I think that the children of families with religious sensitivities being together provides a safer environment" (T13).

As a result of the well-known school culture and environment of IHLs, some parents and students view IHLs as rehabilitation centers. T16 expressed this as: "...the naughtiest children were sent to Imam Hatip... Why? To bring them to their senses... the place is more disciplined or whatever. Since it is religious education, the authority is stronger because it comes from God... they think they will become more moral and comply more easily. There is a sociological thing or a parental understanding that views IHLs as rehabilitation centers" (T16).

One of the most important reasons for choosing IHLs is the perceived safety of the school. According to the interviewees, IHLs are the safest schools for both supporters and opponents. While drugs and illegitimate relationships are extremely common in other high

schools, they are almost nonexistent in IHLs. Parents send their children with this assurance. "There were really very poor children, and even among them, we never encountered drugs. It's not easy to think when you think... about it globally... A father working for minimum wage with three or four children, and one of them hasn't been exposed to drugs!! We also rarely encountered inappropriate relationships with the opposite sex... very rare... This is not a small achievement. If this is a criterion..." (T13).

Some interviewees mentioned that drug use has dropped to ages 12-13, but this rate might be zero in IHLs. They also noted that gang formations are zero in IHLs. Another meaning attributed to the concept of safety is receiving religious education from a safe place. In line with the philosophy of the Republic, religious education given under state supervision became even more important for families, especially after July 15th. Families do not want their children to go to sects and communities for religious education.

Recently, especially due to the increased success with project IHLs, IHLs have also been preferred for academic reasons. However, the number of interviewees who mentioned this reason was relatively fewer. Still, as success in university entrance increases, the number of families sending their children to IHLs for success also increases. Moreover, scholarships given to successful students also increase the appeal of IHLs.

Financial support also emerged as another reason in the interviews. Especially in Anatolia, families sending their children to IHLs receive financial support. IHLs provide dormitories and financial support. "Thus, children from economically disadvantaged families can also find the opportunity to study. Not everyone lives in big cities. Not everyone has the means... A farmer with 3 cows and 5 sheep doesn't have the chance to send their child to school. But they want to educate them, and IHL offers this opportunity. IHLs have dormitories. Anatolian people took care of the dormitories and poor students... For a long time, when someone says that he would build an Imam Hatip dormitory, people give him money. People

build that dormitory! And children stay there. Let's say that dead-end trap that a man falls into himself, education becomes a way of escape for that child in Turkey. In fact, the only way to move up to the upper classes is... through education" (18).

Four of the respondents pointed out that the reason and expectation of the parent and the state for sending the student to the IHLs are different. The parent focuses on the child's education and thinks about his future, while the state wants the ideal citizen. "The parent says, what's the harm in learning religion? In other words, there is a big difference between a parent sending their child and the state taking that child away... The state says, "I will use them in the future when I fight, I will ride on their back. I will need them... they will realize my ideals... The parents want them to find a place in this system, to have a job opportunity in a state staff, and to receive a good education" (T9).

In summary, nearly all respondents noted the connection between adolescence, and questioning religion and authority. IHL students were not exempt from this, the age of religious doubt also applied to them. However, different factors that led to the questioning brought about by the age of doubt were also expressed by different subjects. While some see age alone as sufficient, others see negative religious examples, coercive religious rules or compulsory religious education, in addition to the age of doubt, as factors that push young people to question. Since the IHL students were more familiar with the religion, they were more affected by negative examples. In addition, knowing the religious rules but finding it difficult to comply with them pushed the students of IHL to question religious commandments more.

6.2.1.4. Educational Reasons.

Another important theme affecting the religiosity of students that emerged in the interviews is education. Almost all of the interviewees mentioned reasons related to the educational system. They all agreed that education plays a major role in the transmission of culture and values, and that IHLs have or should have a crucial role in achieving this. However,

according to the respondents who support IHLs, the quality of education in IHLs is not enough to achieve this goal, and thus, there is a need to improve it. On the other hand, those who are against IHLs, while acknowledging the lack of quality in IHLs, argue that increasing the quality is not possible because of the nature of religious education.

The analysis of the interviews produced almost ten codes related to education:

- Modernism
- Modernist/secular education
- Style of education
- Encountering negative teacher types
- Educator quality
- Religion taught
- Methodology of religious education
- Lack of explanations for deficiencies in religious teaching
- Inability of educators to answer questions

For almost all the respondents, one of the most important reasons for the increasing trend of atheism and deism in IHLs was the educational system. While some respondents found the education system generally effective in this regard, others mentioned the influence of teachers or the curriculum. This section is divided into two main headings: teachers and curriculum.

6.2.1.4.1. Inadequate Teachers – Educator Quality.

The inadequacy and/or negative behaviors of vocational course teachers in IHLs emerged as one of the reasons pushing young people to question their beliefs. When a teacher is bad, the student does not blame the teacher personally. "Because it's an Imam Hatip, the religion is symbolized through that teacher by the child... any wrong behavior there automatically reflects on the religion... the teacher is bad, the religion is bad... for example,

forced memorization... in the Quran class... for example... the child does not want to memorize or does not have the ability to memorize... forcing them to memorize... or, as I said, humiliating behavior..." (T7). Another example could be a teacher's dismissive behavior while teaching religion. The lifestyle that is ridiculed and described in a harsh language by the teacher might be the lifestyle of the student's family.

Teachers who are detached from technological developments cannot reach the students because they lack the skills and techniques to communicate appropriately and effectively with young people, and they cannot guide students towards the desired goals. "... Now, this culture and language teach the child certain things, habits. As adults, we cannot know or keep up with these. Therefore, when you are deprived of the techniques and means to direct the language and culture towards desired goals and purposes... you cannot enter the child's world. What do you do? You try to educate the child with your own habits... Today, what parents and teachers who cannot actively use technology do is to try to reach children with the language and culture they learned in their own conditions... But most parents and teachers cannot use a language that can reach the child. They cannot enter their lives. And when they cannot enter... how can you provide effective education and training? As long as you cannot enter the child's life and shape it within your own beliefs... the child will create other worlds for themselves, taking other examples and models... This is very natural" (T12).

T2 mentioned that conservative teachers who have not improved themselves and have limited thinking capacity still exist in IHLs, while noting that new generation teachers are different. T11 noted that teachers who used to impose worship and sometimes even resort to violence no longer exist. "It is the duty of parents and teachers, that is, adults, to explain religion beautifully. After that, the choice belongs to the child. You cannot force a person to worship" (T11). Religious education should be gradual and enjoyable because students have changed. In the past, when something was said to be forbidden (haram), young people did not do it. Now,

they ask why it is forbidden, why it is obligatory. "I think this is actually accurate. People who preach, explain, and teach religion need to be ready for this. When explained in these ways, the child needs to be convinced and act on it. They need to be led to verified faith (tahkiki iman)" (T6).

The reason for this change is that conservative families have changed due to political power and economic strength. Since families have changed, their expectations from the school and the teacher have also changed. Teachers had to adapt to this change. T9 mentioned that in the past, teachers used to scold female students for looking in the mirror, but now they no longer interfere with such things. However, in many cases, the student is more visionary, tolerant, and liberal than the teacher. Their view of the world and their expectations from the world are more different than teachers. They are curious about and want to experience different beliefs, cultures, and ethnic structures. In this respect, the teacher lags behind the student in every aspect. "I think it's like this... for example... students come from a higher level of consciousness, while the teacher is at a lower level. The teacher is at a lower level, the student manages the teacher. For example... when a teacher makes a sexist approach, the student manages it. It's like this... we know that whatever we say will not convince this type, so there's no need to get involved. Let's not get involved at all... students think like this..." (T9). Vocational course teachers, who should be more equipped, do not have the knowledge and formation to reach young people and are pedagogically inadequate. "We see in some videos, indeed, lessons are not being taught, just passed over. This issue is related to the quality of the teacher. We need to train quality teachers" (T6).

According to the analysis of the interviews, the reason for this deficiency is that vocational course teachers do not have adequate training. "Most of them do not have formation. In addition, if there is no logic training, it is not possible to convey the religious belief that they feel in themselves and live by to the children" (T12). T16 claimed that theology and vocational

course teachers have reached a point where they cannot do their job effectively because they are not good at theology and religious education methodology.

The deficiency in religious teaching can also be linked to the pedagogical approaches and attitudes of teachers. Respondents mentioned that teachers often focus on rote learning and memorization, which does not engage students or encourage critical thinking. This traditional approach does not resonate with the students' modern and questioning mindset. The teachers' inability to answer the students' questions convincingly, as mentioned earlier, is also a significant factor in this deficiency.

Some respondents argued that teachers in IHLs are mission-driven. Therefore, teachers who want to provide students with a global citizen vision are rare. "They are mission-driven and these children will be raised as the most loyal soldiers of that mission" (T18). For this reason, especially for female students, the most trusted teachers are culture course teachers, not vocational course teachers. T9 mentioned that the reason for this is the teacher's perspective on the student. "Now, one sees the student as a pawn, the other sees them as a human being. The child understands this. I have no benefit from them, but the other approaches... differently. It's like... sacrificial lambs" (T9). However, students do not see themselves this way and are increasingly moving away from the student type envisioned by teachers. The change in families mentioned above has led to families raising self-confident young people. These young people can say no to their teachers. However, vocational course teachers do not want students who say no, because they believe in an educational style where the teacher speaks, and the student accepts and listens. The reason they believe in this style of education is the meaning they attribute to themselves.

Conservative teachers who do not improve themselves cannot bring innovation to the student. Most teachers are not prepared for the questions young people bring because they have never heard such questions before. T13 described this as living in their own bubble. "The

teacher has never encountered an atheist or a deist. They lived in an aquarium" (T13). The description of teachers living in an aquarium was also expressed differently by other respondents. "There is a closed-circuit system, and the teachers do not go outside of it. I am not talking about all vocational course teachers. Among them are those who can see the issue and the future and include different teaching methods in their classes, even if the current curriculum is different, and I know them... But... as long as this vicious circle continues to produce teachers this way... it does not seem very possible for us to write a success story in the field of religious education and to say something to today's children" (T16).

Respondents who linked the problem more to the doctrine argued that religion as a concept cannot be developed. Some respondents mentioned the difficulty of going beyond traditional religious teaching, while others claimed it was impossible. "How can vocational course teachers improve themselves? How will the Quran be expanded? I don't understand! (completes with a laugh)" (T9). The main reason Imam Hatip and faculty of theology students distance themselves from religion is that Imam Hatip and faculty educators cannot answer the students' questions convincingly. "As someone who is involved in this work and goes to Imam Hatip schools every year to check on teachers, I repeat that religious figures are not capable of answering the religious and non-religious questions of modern children" (T5). The reason for this is that they do not have convincing answers. "They are not stupid, if they had answers, they would give them. They don't have answers... The most important reason for the secularizing effect of religious education institutions is that religious figures cannot answer the religious and non-religious questions of children and cannot convince them... The reason they cannot give convincing answers to religious questions is not because they are ignorant... but because there is no answer to those questions! There is no answer to give" (T5).

The possibility of students distancing themselves from religion, due to any reason such as the attitude or ignorance of a vocational course teacher or the lack of an answer, was

expressed with sadness by respondents who have taught or are currently teaching in IHLs. T7 mentioned that such a mission is imposed on them (religious education teachers), they do not see themselves in such a position, and that no human being is strong enough to come between a person and God. Sometimes even an atheist imposes this mission. "The possibility that someone might quarrel with God because of you is very upsetting" (T7).

According to the analysis of the interviews, another factor that affects the religiosity of students is the teacher's personality traits. One of these is the emphasis on personal hygiene. T8 mentioned that most teachers do not pay attention to their hygiene and this has an impact on young people. Another is the gap between the vocational course teacher's appearance and the lifestyle they describe. "I have had such bad teacher profiles in my life... For example, the teacher uses tobacco but advises the students not to use tobacco in the lesson. And these young people perceive such things and then become indifferent to them" (T8). This is not an issue that should be attributed only to vocational course teachers because teachers who teach culture courses can also exhibit this type of behavior. However, the impact is greater because vocational course teachers teach religion. Students' expectations from vocational course teachers are higher than from other teachers. "If the person does not accept the religion of the person teaching religion, it means not accepting the person" (T4). In this case, they distance themselves from religion because they think they have to distance themselves from that teacher.

Some respondents who support IHLs argued that this imposition is understandable. The impact of a teacher teaching religion on a young person is very different from that of other teachers because religion does not teach simple information; it dictates a way of life. "A value that gives meaning to our personality is the ultimate goal... the highest value that gives meaning to people's lives. Therefore, a disappointment in this regard naturally... shakes the foundations of personality. It can cause... a great trauma" (T12). Thus, when the religion

teacher responds reactively without trying to understand the young person's criticisms, the young person's reaction becomes significant.

According to the respondents who support the IHL, serious responsibilities fall on all vocational course teachers to solve the educator problem. In-service training is also being conducted for this purpose. However, the change in these teachers still seems quite difficult. Teachers resist, asking if a new religion is being invented. According to T16, "If we were to broadcast the ideas I expressed in this interview live to vocational course teachers... some would lynch me, asking if I'm trying to change the religion" (T16). In-service training is not as effective as desired in changing teachers because vocational course teachers are trained in the faculty of theology, and students are sent there from IHL. This is a vicious circle that needs to be overcome, but it is very difficult to do so.

Teacher Training – Theology Faculties: Vocational course teachers at IHL are trained in theology faculties. The primary source of students for theology faculties is largely IHLs. The closed-circuit system or aquarium-like situation mentioned in the previous section actually stems from this vicious circle. This cycle of IHL, theology, and back to IHL hinders the change and development of both teachers and students. What makes this situation even more intractable, as noted by many respondents, is that theology faculty is generally preferred by middle and lower-level IHL students. Especially from IHLs that admit students with high scores, only a few, sometimes just one student, prefer studying theology. The rest consider fields like medicine, engineering, and law as their first choices.

Therefore, when questioning teacher quality, the quality of the theology faculties that train the teachers should be examined. "... All the teachers in our Imam Hatips who exhibit the behaviors and attitudes we complain about are theology graduates, of course. I mean, how are we training them here... with what mindset are they being trained... I cannot understand" (T18). Particularly, respondents who are academics in theology faculties criticize theology

faculties on two points. The first was the 2013 attempt to abolish philosophy courses in theology faculties. Many academics from theology faculties with a strong tradition opposed this decision by YÖK (higher education council). Theology faculties, especially those highly regarded, announced that they would not implement this decision. Other theology faculties followed suit, and the decision was retracted. Some universities, however, chose to comply with this decision and reduced or abolished philosophy courses.

The other issue was the lack of pedagogical formation in theology faculties. In education faculties, students choose their department with the intention of becoming teachers and receive appropriate training. In theology faculties, which do not aim to train teachers like education faculties, students take heavy religious courses but do not learn how to convey this to high school students. "Because there's this... I've read heavy exegesis texts. Someone who has been trained in theology in this way from the tradition... Eee... I don't find it right to put someone in front of today's high school students to teach Fiqh without knowing how to teach it. And there's this... the problem for me is... that... the theoretical background I received in theology has no practical counterpart. Naturally, there..." (T16).

The closure of the faculties that used to train religious culture and ethics teachers under education faculties has also negatively affected religious education not only in IHLs but also in regular high schools. These faculties were closed, claiming they produced secular teachers who were incompetent and lacked religious knowledge. According to T16, this faculty was very good and could have been developed further. Multi-program theology faculties could have been developed from this, and departments could have been opened to train teachers for different vocational course branches. Thus, vocational course teachers could receive pedagogical formation and could go on internships in schools from the first grade onwards. The respondent named this the 'multi-program theology faculty model.' He suggested it could

be a solution to the educational problems in IHLs, as vocational course teachers would be familiar with the language of the students they would train and how to teach them.

The number of theology faculties was also increased beyond need. According to respondents, this increase should have been gradual and based on need. Too many students were admitted as well. "When there are more students than needed, there aren't enough teachers, and teachers from other branches are brought in. Teachers teach subjects outside their expertise... This directly affects the students. When the students graduate and become teachers, they may not be adequate. Teachers who graduated as teachers are not as successful in conveying these subjects to their students... as those who took lessons from the teachers of those subjects" (T6).

Many theology students already come from IHLs with many prejudices and preconceived notions. Many are still under the influence of communities and sects. They stay in their dormitories and attend theology faculty with that identity, not listening to their teachers. Regardless of the quality of the theology faculties, students who close themselves off to change and development graduate and teach their students with the same mindset. "Theology students... so... this kid resists taking much from you... s/he thinks I will be corrupted; they will corrupt me. And then those kids will become Imam Hatip teachers... And... unfortunately... they are not fully within our influence as teachers. It's also hard to control. I'm not sure how much we affect them... do we have a 20-25% impact?" (T18).

This is also supported by the educators' claim that the teacher training system of vocational courses has failed. As T8 mentioned, when hiring teachers, if more care is not taken to ensure that people with a proper lifestyle, who have matured in certain areas, are chosen, the situation will not improve. This concern was also raised by T11: "For a long time, I have been concerned about this issue, because we are not in the position of renewing our knowledge as

required. We are in a very bad position regarding the training of vocational course teachers" (T11).

Respondents argued that for teachers to be successful in religious education, they need to improve themselves. In IHLs, this should be planned as a system from the top down. However, for this, the state must decide what it wants from religious education, what its goals are, and what it wants to achieve. According to T16, if the decision-makers do not care about the development of teachers, if they do not care about what the expectations of children and parents are from teachers, teachers cannot be successful. "No matter how much a teacher cares about self-development, it is not possible to achieve this only with their personal efforts" (T16). If the state has such a decision, the first step to be taken should be to raise the self-confidence of teachers because if the teacher does not have self-confidence, they cannot give the child the power to develop their self-confidence. If the state does not care about this and does not take the necessary steps, the expected success cannot be achieved.

T18, an academic in theology, said they struggle greatly to educate in theology, and students resist not learning or changing. "That's why... as I said... we talked to our dean a few times. I said, 'imagine our faculty is like a shop... a businessman thinks about profit and loss, what's produced, what's coming and going. In the end, he sees it's... full loss and closes the shop. We need to close or leave our faculty with these results. The students we produce talk like this?! Where did they come from?'" (T18).

Teacher Training – In-Service: Aware of this deficiency in teachers, MEB and IHL-supporting associations emphasize in-service training. MEB determines competencies for vocational course teachers, which are the characteristics a teacher should have. They do this with a large group of academics, including teachers. Teachers are expected to develop themselves in these qualities. "We expect teachers to develop themselves academically; this is part of the quality monitoring system... It's divided into two... academic and professional

development areas. We hold continuous seminars, bringing teachers together with academics, especially those with international experience" (T2).

Teachers are trained on how to communicate with young people and how to implement a constructive education. They are expected to adopt a student-centered approach and a questioning style rather than preaching. Teachers need to update themselves in this way. According to respondents who have high positions in MEB and IHL-supporting associations, the essential thing is for a person to develop themselves, continuously renew themselves, and be open to the truth. Today, teachers are inadequate in adolescent psychology. Teachers should also enter the virtual environments where young people socialize and establish that communication.

There are also foundations and associations that work on the development of vocational course teachers, publishing books and magazines. These associations develop learning products in addition to the textbooks for teachers. They also organize training and seminars to develop teaching skills and produce teaching materials. "For example... let's say in the religious culture course... There's the... 5th grade 1st unit about the belief in Allah, the attributes of Allah. We create activities or puzzles related to this, or we develop concept maps and publish them on our websites... We provide all the electronic materials we produce to teachers for free" (T16).

Ideal Teacher Model: What should an ideal, i.e., targeted, teacher be like? According to some respondents, an IHL vocational course teacher should know what virtuous deeds are, understand true religion, religious freedom, and that there is no compulsion in religion, and be able to convey this to the student. Vocational course teachers are trained/should be trained this way in theology faculties and in-service training processes.

According to T7, a vocational course teacher at an IHL, not every vocational course teacher can achieve this. T7 described the ideal teacher as follows: "Vocational courses are not

just about learning religion; they are also about maturing students' personalities, building their responsibilities towards their parents, neighbors, animals, the disabled, the disadvantaged, or even their own bodies. Not every teacher can do this... but for me... at least, this is how it should be. I definitely enter my classes with these outcomes in mind. For instance, instead of focusing on definitions or Arabic words and sentences, I want to give the student these values. This is important to me. I am transferring values. That is, sharing feelings and fostering these feelings in the child... Otherwise, if the child is going to study religion deeply... let them go to theology faculty and memorize what they need to memorize there, do whatever they need to do. For me, coming to an IHL does not mean memorizing certain Qur'anic verses. I don't want that. I want to regulate their relationship with their neighbors, take care of orphans, ensure they don't abuse animals, and instill these values. If they are going to be a mother, I want them to be a good mother; if they are going to be a father, I want them to be a compassionate father who fulfills his duties towards his spouse. Our courses have a lot of these outcomes. Teachers who wish can emphasize this. I like to emphasize these aspects more" (T7).

6.2.1.4.2. Curriculum.

Nearly all respondents indicated that the IHL curriculum is inadequate, with various deficiencies and mistakes. While supporters of the IHL suggested that updating the curriculum would solve the problems, opponents argued that since religion doesn't change, religious knowledge won't change either, so updating would not affect its impact. A few respondents stated that changes in the language and style of religious teaching, even if the religion doesn't change, could positively affect IHL students. Criticisms related to the curriculum were categorized into two main areas: criticisms of the content of the curriculum (i.e., the religious knowledge provided) and criticisms of the way this knowledge is delivered.

There was no consensus among respondents on how to name the courses offered at IHLs. Some supporters referred to them as religious and cultural courses, while others called

them vocational courses. Some rejected the distinction between religious and non-religious courses. Opponents generally categorized courses as religious and secular. Throughout the section, when referring to courses, I will use the term that the mentioned respondents used.

The IHL curriculum is accessible to everyone on the Ministry of National Education's website. The fundamental philosophy and general objectives of the courses are also available on the website (link for those interested: MEB Curriculum¹⁰). Therefore, I did not ask detailed questions about vocational courses. However, some respondents provided information related to the curriculum and general objectives connected to this study's questions. Before moving on to criticisms of the curriculum, let's review these points.

All respondents who viewed IHLs as a third path among school types explained this by highlighting that the IHL curriculum includes both religious and secular courses. Although the proportion of these courses may change from time to time, religious courses always constitute at least 30%. In the final year of high school or in project schools focused on science and social sciences, this ratio drops to 3 to 1. Even in this case, T16, who stated that the courses are particularly demanding in project schools, said that families choose this knowingly and willingly. The IHL vocational course curriculum has significantly expanded the pool of elective courses, allowing students who want to gain more detailed religious knowledge to choose these electives. "Actually, regarding vocational courses, for example, the Fiqh course is mandatory, but there is an elective course called Fiqh Readings that students can choose within certain limits, depending on the school's capacity and availability of teachers for those courses" (T16).

The religious courses in the curriculum are the main feature that distinguishes IHLs from other school types. They offer both vocational and cultural courses, thus providing students with knowledge across all areas of life. According to T2, who prefers to call these

¹⁰ <https://mufredat.meb.gov.tr/Dosyalar/201812019324133-AIL%20Meslek%20Dersleri%20Ogretim%20Programi%20MArapca.pdf>

courses cultural courses rather than vocational courses, it is crucial for the young person to have knowledge in both areas. "To me, for instance, a math course is not a secular course. A biology course is not a secular course, from my perspective" (T2). He explained this view saying that God is the creator of existence, and His first command is 'read.' Reading existence happens through all courses. The information given through revelation is concretely seen in subjects like biology, physics, chemistry, and mathematics. Therefore, combining cultural and religious courses leads to a healthy education. "They may differentiate these courses, saying some are vocational and aimed at the afterlife, while others are aimed at worldly life. But... actually... there is no such distinction; they are all guidance for humanity in this world. ... When we think about IHLs, there are no secular courses or religious courses or vocational courses. There are just courses, all related to this world, and this is the ideal" (T2).

Regardless of whether they are called cultural, secular, or vocational courses, each of these subjects attempts to understand different aspects of human knowledge, and individuals must cultivate themselves in all these areas. IHLs aim to educate people in all these fields, producing policies and efforts toward this goal. The purpose of this curriculum is to ensure the healthy development of individuals. It views a person as a whole, without dividing them into parts concerning the world and the hereafter. When this wholeness is disrupted, significant problems arise. "... Look at the Middle East. It is a remnant of those years. The fragmented, divided, non-objective structure based on individuals or some sheikhs of that time has resulted in the bloodbath we see in the Middle East today. That tradition continues. Why? Because humanity continues to live... according to that tradition. ... If you divide life into religious and secular domains, you fragment life. ... But we say that to avoid this oppressive understanding... we need a correct understanding of religion and the world, viewing them without dividing the universe. You can only deliver this correctly through a combination of cultural and vocational courses" (T2).

Some respondents looked at the educational style in IHLs from larger perspective. Some claimed that the primary reason for the atheist-deist trend observed even in IHLs is the modernist and secular education system applied for the past 200 years. Secularism means God is in heaven, and the system we designed is here on earth. T4 stated that in a society that has undergone this education for at least 5-6 generations, atheist-deist tendencies are normal. "... And we have said to everyone that God is somewhere in heaven, His rules are there, you are here! And you will set and follow the rules. That's why... the principle of secularism taught us that no legal rule should be based on religion. Isn't this deism? We did this! and now... we are blaming the youth... We educated you! I would be surprised if they weren't deists" (T4). Therefore, the IHL curriculum is crucial because if the country is to grow, it will rise again on the values that have existed throughout its history, and IHLs are the institutions that will reproduce those values.

According to T3, who views IHLs as a state project that surpasses government power, the curriculum is extremely state-centric and centralized. Textbooks, course content, etc., are all determined by the state. The curriculum is designed to prevent radicalization, meaning there is no threat to the state, and the religion taught is the official religion. Conversely, T1 argued the opposite: "(Currently in IHLs) the education provided is detrimental to Turkiye. It portrays secularism, Alevis, Kurds, Armenians, and Greeks as enemies... it teaches that these have been our enemies for a thousand years. It is actually a harmful education" (T1).

Some respondents stated that the curriculum is quite inadequate. It cannot teach how to be a global citizen or distinguish between good and bad. There are religious courses, but they are just templates that cannot prepare IHL students for the future. This is also one of the reasons for atheist-deist tendencies. When IHL graduates start university, they face integration issues in various aspects, from relationships with the opposite sex to dress code and worldview. "... For example, an IHL graduate should not become an atheist when s/he goes to the philosophy

department at the Middle East Technical University. I mean... that curriculum's reflections... its roots... the philosophical roots should also be present in the IHL curriculum. The student should not be overwhelmed by things they have never studied before and be confused. Those concepts should be included in the curriculum in small doses... without being protective. For example... they should already know Nietzsche from the IHL curriculum, not just at ODTU (Middle East Technical University). They should already have read William James and be familiar with Bertrand Russell's arguments. Including these in small doses in the curriculum... can prevent such disorientation. But it happens... which means intervention is needed in the curriculum. I have always said that the IHL and theology curriculum is very, very classical, very classical" (T18).

Claiming that religious education cannot meet the needs of young people, T1 exemplified this through the young person's questions about daily life. "The IHL youth has questions and cannot find answers to them in religious education. He wants to have a girlfriend... he cannot resolve his sexuality as a teenager and... cannot find an answer in religion" (T1). According to T1, what the young man is actually looking for is not atheism-deism, but a natural religion. Traditional orthodox Islam, which is the basis of the IHL curriculum, cannot solve the problems of young people. Atheism-deism won't be able to solve it either. Religious education cannot provide the morality that religion should provide. Atheism-deism will not provide either. "... instead there is something else, something in between, natural religion. that is, natural religion that is not traditional but not atheistic either. Natural religion means the natural religion that suits human life, needs, and, the inclinations of young people. In other words, it will meet their needs" (T1).

The religious education provided in IHLs includes traditional religious knowledge, which many respondents identified as the root of the problem. This religious knowledge is in no way compatible with the realities young people face in their lives; they are entirely different.

According to T12, this creates a perception in the minds of young people that religion is not something that can be lived or that has the power to govern life. The essential point is to present religious knowledge to young people within their current conditions, using vivid examples. Young people should be able to engage with religious beliefs and values.

Despite all its power, material resources, and institutional structure, if atheistic and deistic tendencies still exist in IHLs, even if one child becomes an atheist or deist, traditional religious education is not appealing to young people, said T18. As long as the role of religion in Türkiye and the meaning attributed to IHLs is to train individuals to perform funerals and lead prayers, young people will protest. Young people will not only stop leading prayers but might not even perform them. "Your archaic, traditional mindset is over. If you still say a woman should sit in the corner of the house, if you still say that, the child says I do not accept this... When they say I do not accept this, the parents lose their minds and come to me. The child says this. What will the child say? The child is right, I say you are the problem. What will the child say? I'm telling you the same thing. You say a woman's place is in the corner of the house. This is like what the Taliban does. You say this in Türkiye... and your name is not Taliban, but you say the same thing" (T18).

Regardless of whether they support or oppose IHLs, many respondents noted that the teachings in IHLs are Sunni Islam, classical orthodox Islam. T1, who questioned the extent to which the religious courses in the curriculum are genuinely religious, claimed that rote learning of stereotypical information is enforced in IHLs. This respondent, who made the strongest critique, described classical orthodox Islam as follows: "What does classical orthodox Islam mean? It means the understanding of religion formed around political powers that emerged throughout Islamic history after the Prophet's death. The Umayyads, Abbasids, Seljuks, and Ottomans... they were Muslim military agricultural empires that lasted for many years. To meet their religious needs, many books were written, travelogues were penned... To address their

judicial needs, how women should be judged, how land should be divided, how wars should be conducted, how to pray, how to fast, how to go to Hajj, and how to return from Umrah... Societies had needs related to religious regulations in all areas of life, and it was necessary to produce religious knowledge to meet these needs, which was done by the scholars we call ulema in madrasas at that time. Thus, Islamic culture was formed within the framework of empires... we call this Sunni Islam. The Directorate of Religious Affairs and Imam Hatip schools in the Republican period are a continuation of this, and almost all other unofficial religious orders and communities... the AK Party also draws from the same religious roots... they are nourished by fabricated hadiths, their common feature... they are not nourished much by the Qur'an but more by fabricated hadiths... Turks by Turkish culture, Arabs by old Arab culture. They have a religious understanding compatible with sultanates and empires" (T1). According to T1, the reason for teaching this understanding in IHLs is not to teach the correct religion but to instill religion as part of the national identity. "They don't care about the content, it doesn't matter, they say... What is Islam? This is Sunni Islam" (T1).

The young person who learns this religion starts to question both its reflection in their own life and the historical narratives. They question the bans imposed on their relationships with the opposite sex and their daily lives. They question the stories told about the Prophet's life. They see and begin to criticize some practices carried out in the name of religion that do not make sense to them. "The Prophet married a girl at nine years old, how can such a thing be possible? Or the Prophet sent his men to stab and kill a poet who criticized him... they portray the Prophet like an ISIS member. Someone who beheads and kills in the name of religion. When the Imam Hatip student reads this, doubts start to form in their mind, wondering how such a thing can be possible" (T1).

The current religious education is not of a quality that can address these doubts. Especially with the changes brought by time, the information given and the way it is conveyed

have become inadequate. Another criticism of the content of religious courses is the method of transmission. While in the past, teaching information as it was was sufficient to build morality, today's students do not want to hear information they can find with an internet search. According to T6, students want different interpretations, more analytical information, and learning environments that provide this. They see the other kind as a waste of time. Although this desire is not very high right now, it will soon become pressing, leading to a reassessment of the religious education approach. This situation is more intense in successful IHLs in big cities. Young people question what the teacher says, asking 'according to whom, according to what.' "Don't teach me what I can find on Google. Teach me life skills. Teach me knowledge that will be useful in life. This is also the case with Islamic jurisprudence; my concern is to find solutions to current issues. Give me that... So, rather than directly giving information to the child, it is necessary to first outline the framework of that information... where... they can access this information and how can they reach this conclusion. Here, we need to discuss methodology in religious education again" (T16).

Religious instruction/education is given without considering the audience, which prevents real communication. According to T12, religious instruction lacks this subtlety, which is why it does not find a place in the young person's world of meaning. There is no aesthetics in religious instruction; information from books is presented as general truths, everywhere and to everyone. The problem is not with religion or religious people but with the language of religion. "The problem is in the language of religion. We have not been able to create a suitable religious language. Perhaps theology professors, the Directorate of Religious Affairs... should I say the Islamic world... This is a matter of mentality, a mentality issue. Today, we are still trying to understand and manage today with concepts from old books. This is not possible. This is a system of knowledge production, an epistemological problem" (T12). This epistemological problem leads to an education system that cannot create a religious language. As a result, young

people are not satisfied with the religious knowledge provided; they find it meaningless and hollow. This meaninglessness leads them to research other topics that pique their curiosity.

T16 noted that in religious instruction, there is an equation that suggests the more religious knowledge is imparted to a child, the more religious and moral they will become, but this is not true. Knowledge does not bring about practice or morality. Although the education curriculum is frequently updated, the religious instruction curriculum has not changed much since the first school period of the Ottoman era. "We need a curriculum that can carry the child and young person of the future. Currently, with the traditional instruction in vocational courses in IHLs, such as Islamic jurisprudence and the life of the Prophet, we will not be able to say anything to the children of the new age! We are already seeing indications of this" (T16).

Respondents had different opinions on updating the curriculum. Some stated that the curriculum has been updated, with topics related to contemporary belief issues and answers to current questions added to the books, covering everything young people think about. Other respondents claimed that the curriculum and the way it is delivered have never been brought to a sufficient level. The reason for this is that it is politicians, not educators, who decide on the curriculum. T18 humorously suggested a solution to this situation: "Gather the National Education Council and lock them in until white smoke comes out, just like in the papal election. They can't come out until a proper curriculum is produced, even if it takes a month or two... Okay:)" (T18).

A new religious language and understanding are needed because life flows on, and the old religious language does not appeal to today's children and young people. T16 stated that this is not about bringing a new religion but that the language of religion must change and adapt to the flow. "As the saying goes, you can't dry today's laundry with yesterday's sun; we can't dry our laundry. If we continue like this, the situation will probably get worse. ... It will probably get worse because even though we are discussing these things now" (T16). Before

things get worse, it is necessary to teach the aspects of the religious texts that touch today's world, rather than just memorizing them. Simply saying 'absolutely forbidden' to everything that appeals to today's youth with adult language is not a solution. It is necessary to show a middle way and explain the boundaries reasonably. Because now, when you say 'absolutely forbidden,' young people do not accept it. On the contrary, it attracts more of their interest.

T13 also noted that the curriculum, language, and discourse need updating. It is difficult to reach students who come with questions they get from atheist websites otherwise. One needs to be prepared for the questions they will ask. "In such a world, no sane person would accept that there is no risk in constantly teaching a 100-year-old book" (T13). This is actually an opportunity to be evaluated for a more innovative religious education approach.

According to T16, who is not hopeful about IHLs making young people religious, also referred to the IHL curriculum. Vocational courses need to be placed on a more analytical level, some courses need to be removed, and different courses need to be included. However, another factor that makes this difficult is society. It is impossible to reach a social consensus on this issue. "They could make our lives miserable on this topic. I don't mean in terms of violence... But they will say... no my brother, this is indispensable for us. This is our value. This is our sacredness. We will not allow it to be interfered with," said T16. It is easy to change the curriculum on paper, but society will take a stand and say religion is removed from IHLs. If the grassroots are convinced, then the teachers will object. The real problem here is the cycle between IHL, theology faculties, and back to IHL. This is a vicious circle, a closed circuit. "There are teachers who can foresee the future or even now, who can include different teaching methods in their classrooms even if the current curriculum is different. But as long as this vicious circle continues to produce teachers in this way, it does not seem very possible for us to write a success story in the field of religious education and say something to today's children" (T16).

T1, who stated that the IHL curriculum would make an intelligent student an atheist, mentioned that due to his position, he has witnessed many shifts towards atheism and deism. Young people question the Islamic culture taught in IHL and seek a way out. Those who cannot find a way out and do not have access to the right sources and answers first lean towards deism and then atheism. "They reach out to me either by email, by phone, or in person. They say, 'I am about to leave religion, but I don't want to... I love God and the Prophet because I've been raised this way since childhood... It feels like abandoning my childhood, I'm having an identity crisis,' and so on. When they separate from it, they also fall into depression. They say, 'What will I do without God? I've been so used to it since I was little, but actually, it was a lie, there is no such thing. What do you say, teacher? What is your opinion on this matter?' There are many young people who are leaving, about to leave, trying to return but can't, and who say 'it's all over for me now'" (T1).

T1, who is the most assertive about the issue of atheism and deism in IHL and is a believer himself, claimed that IHL does not produce the pious generation as intended. "This will be the last generation of pious... generation they are raising. The situation is that in the future... people are increasingly distancing themselves from religion... First, they move towards a natural religion, and if that doesn't suffice, they move towards atheism. And in atheism, they find a morality of their own. A more humane one... that allows for fun, does not interfere with every aspect of human life, and simply says be honest, work with your effort. This is enough for them! They say if religion does not provide this, I will find it elsewhere. This is what they are looking for" (T1).

Kalam (Theology) Class: There are many vocational courses in IHL, yet, during the interviews, special emphasis was placed on only one of these: the kalam class. Since I realized the importance of this course and that it should be questioned only after the first few interviews, there is no information about it in the initial interviews. However, later on, particularly the

participants who supported IHL attributed great importance to the kalam class and generally stated: If the kalam class is taught properly, the problem of atheism-deism in IHL would largely be resolved. So, what is the kalam class?

According to the kalam course curriculum published by the Directorate General of Religious Education (DÖGM, 2017), theology is "a discipline that, based on the texts (Qur'an and hadith), determines the principles of faith and the fundamental principles related to human thought, explains these through rational methods, supports them, and critiques and responds to opposing ideas." This course aims to equip IHL students with the skills to "ground the principles of faith and basic principles based on the texts (Qur'an and hadith), explain them through rational methods, and critique and respond to opposing ideas."¹¹

The participants who are vocational course teachers in IHL also academically work in the field of kalam. They cited the importance of this course as the reason for their focus on this area. They preferred to give the kalam course among many vocational courses because they enjoyed discussing and debating faith topics with the students. T7 mentioned that he did not want to leave this course to teachers who would teach it in a classical way; instead, he preferred to ask questions, even confusing the students, and engaging them in discussions. "In the kalam class, for example, I often say... I explain... sometimes I ask very difficult questions about faith, about God. They get scared. At first, they even get disturbed when I say 'God (Tanrı).' They say, 'Teacher, are you leading us astray? What are you doing? What are we supposed to do with these questions when we go home?' I say, 'I am disturbing your mental comfort. Think, please think. Later they say, 'Teacher, I am about to reach a bad conclusion with this thought.' You can, that's your choice. And you are responsible for your choices, whether it's Islam or something else" (T7).

¹¹ Kalam dersi öğretim programı [Kalam course teaching program], 2017.
https://dogm.meb.gov.tr/meb_iys_dosyalar/2017_08/17174813_AYHL_Kelam_2017.pdf

"Everything starts with saying yes, with faith", said T13. He sees faith as a seed and said that the soil in which it is planted must be healthy for the seed to be healthy, so the fruit will also be beautiful. This can be achieved by explaining faith topics in a simple, straightforward manner. "...Like in the life of the Prophet ... There aren't such theoretical discussions, no. When faith is processed in that format, which includes idealism, I think a very different picture will emerge" (T13).

Faith explained in this way leads the student to true faith. If this does not happen, the youth flounder. Even if they do not completely leave the religion, they falter and cannot fully perform their worship. The solution to this is to update the kalam course curriculum and train quality teachers. The language of this course needs to be compatible with the language of the youth. Trying to prove the existence of God with evidence from the 4th and 9th centuries and using those discourses are no longer sufficient for today's youth. According to participants who are working in the field of kalam, although it is not necessary to explain all the tremendous advancements in science, teachers should be aware of them and teach the subjects with this awareness. This is not about changing the religion, but about changing the way it is explained.

Here, the question of whether all IHL teachers are qualified to teach the kalam course properly comes into play, as in other vocational courses. Teachers are needed who can answer the children's questions comprehensively and from a broad perspective. Especially for questions about existence, ontological questions, a scholar of kalam or philosopher should answer. It is not about saying "this is definitely the case," because Islam seeks faith based on persuasion. This happens through kalam and philosophy. However, in the theology faculties that train teachers for IHL, kalam and philosophy courses are subjects of debate, and their hours are attempted to be reduced. T6 mentioned that at his university, the hours for kalam and philosophy are balanced. However, this varies for each faculty; in some faculties, they are not

completely removed but are particularly reduced. "But if you close the way of philosophy and kalam... it means we are cutting the branch we are sitting on" (T6).

Answering the question of whether the kalam courses taught in theology faculties are sufficient to train quality teachers, T18 said that in his university, whatever is discussed in philosophy, whether theist or atheist, is also covered in kalam courses. All tendencies are handled as current kalam problems. This is part of the scholar's job. "The part that reflects on the IHL curriculum, that is, determining the fundamental principles of religion, and arguing and defending those principles rationally and intellectually, is what kalam does. This is the definition area... of kalam... kalam does this... Belief in God. All opposing views against that belief are defended within kalam. We kind of act as God's lawyers. We call ourselves that:))" (T18).

The reflection of the kalam course taught in theology faculties on IHL is as much as the IHL curriculum. The curriculum is prepared by the Board of Education and Discipline. When asked about who and how contributes to the preparation of the curriculum, T18 said that this is related to politics: "It's completely political, now whichever political power prefers... The head of the Board of Education and Discipline works with the Directorate General of Religious Education to develop the curriculum. Whoever they want support from can choose someone with a similar mindset. Or let's say more... reasonable, rational, XXXX faculty has a tradition of prioritizing reason in this regard. Other theology faculties may be more conservative on this issue. The person says, 'I will work with this one...' The political context determines with whom they will work... So... politics determine the curriculum for other courses as well... I mean... the teachers who determine it are chosen by politics" (T18). As a result of this, people and institutions that look at religious issues not with a rational perspective but with a view closer to classical views have been brought to the fore. When I asked T18 about the effect of this on the youth, he said, "I mean... these complaints don't come out of nowhere."

For this reason, there is no neutral education in a high school where religion is taught. Students' expectations from vocational course teachers are higher than from other teachers. "If the person does not accept the religion of the person teaching religion, it means not accepting the person" (T4).

According to the analysis of the interviews, another factor that affects the religiosity of students is the teacher's personality traits. One of these is the emphasis on personal hygiene. T8 mentioned that most teachers do not pay attention to their hygiene and this has an impact on young people. Another is the gap between the vocational course teacher's appearance and the lifestyle they describe. "I have had such bad teacher profiles in my life... For example, the teacher uses tobacco but advises the students not to use tobacco in the lesson. And these young people perceive such things and then become indifferent to them" (T8). This is not an issue that should be attributed only to vocational course teachers because teachers who teach culture courses can also exhibit this type of behavior. However, the impact is greater because vocational course teachers teach religion. In this case, they distance themselves from religion because they think they have to distance themselves from that teacher.

For students, even the use of different terminology between teachers and students can create a negative perception. For example, the concepts of "Worldly and otherworldly happiness" are not understood by children. These concepts create a perception that religion belongs to the old generation. "I was very surprised. Why are you always talking about the world? We are talking about something else. My daughter said something very nice at that time. Why are they still saying these things? They can't speak our language" (T12).

This is also supported by the educators' claim that the teacher training system of vocational courses has failed. As T8 mentioned, when hiring teachers, if more care is not taken to ensure that people with a proper lifestyle, who have matured in certain areas, are chosen, the situation will not improve. This concern was also raised by T11: "For a long time, I have been

concerned about this issue, because we are not in the position of renewing our knowledge as required. We are in a very bad position regarding the training of vocational course teachers" (T11).

Respondents argued that for teachers to be successful in religious education, they need to improve themselves. In IHLs, this should be planned as a system from the top down. However, for this, the state must decide what it wants from religious education, what its goals are, and what it wants to achieve. According to T16, if the decision-makers do not care about the development of teachers, if they do not care about what the expectations of children and parents are from teachers, teachers cannot be successful. "No matter how much a teacher cares about self-development, it is not possible to achieve this only with their personal efforts" (T16). If the state has such a decision, the first step to be taken should be to raise the self-confidence of teachers because if the teacher does not have self-confidence, they cannot give the child the power to develop their self-confidence. If the state does not care about this and does not take the necessary steps, the expected success cannot be achieved.

The Curriculum Issue – Deficiency in Religious Teaching: The second issue related to education is the curriculum. The content and methodology of religious education should be able to meet the needs of the time. However, according to the respondents, this has not been achieved yet, and in the current form, vocational courses are not sufficient to meet the needs and expectations of young people. According to T1, the most important problem is the quality of education in vocational courses because the classes are not adequately taught. "Here, the knowledge is missing, it is not being given, in the past, for example, people could learn prayer, ablution, what is wajib, sunnah, these were known in our time, but they are not known anymore" (T1). In other words, there is a deficiency in religious teaching.

T3 mentioned that students, due to the lack of a proper methodology, have a hard time in vocational courses, and this difficulty leads them to move away from religion. T7 mentioned

that although not directly stated by the students, they understood from their attitudes that the problem was due to the difficulty of the subject, which was often not well explained. In the past, there was no need to explain, when the teacher said something, it was accepted. But now students ask questions. "I think this is actually accurate. People who preach, explain, and teach religion need to be ready for this. When explained in these ways, the child needs to be convinced and act on it. They need to be led to verified faith" (T7).

According to the analysis of the interviews, the reason for this deficiency is that vocational course teachers do not have adequate training. "Most of them do not have formation. In addition, if there is no logic training, it is not possible to convey the religious belief that they feel in themselves and live by to the children" (T12). T16 claimed that theology and vocational course teachers have reached a point where they cannot do their job effectively because they are not good at theology and religious education methodology.

The deficiency in religious teaching can also be linked to the pedagogical approaches and attitudes of teachers. Respondents mentioned that teachers often focus on rote learning and memorization, which does not engage students or encourage critical thinking. This traditional approach does not resonate with the students' modern and questioning mindset. The teachers' inability to answer the students' questions convincingly, as mentioned earlier, is also a significant factor in this deficiency.

Furthermore, the curriculum's content may not be relevant to the students' real-life experiences and concerns. If the religious teachings are perceived as outdated or disconnected from contemporary issues, students may find them irrelevant. The curriculum needs to be updated to address the current issues and challenges faced by young people, making it more applicable to their lives.

In summary, the educational reasons for the increasing trend of atheism-deism among students in IHLs are multifaceted. They include the inadequacy and negative behaviors of

vocational course teachers, the lack of teacher training and development, the use of outdated and irrelevant curriculum content, and the failure to adopt modern pedagogical approaches. Addressing these issues requires a systemic change in the education system, with a focus on improving teacher quality, updating the curriculum, and adopting methodologies that engage students and encourage critical thinking.

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6.2.1.5. Religious Reasons.

The reasons that drive IHL students away from religion, even pushing them towards atheism and deism, were not only mentioned by atheist or religion-averse respondents but also by religious ones. While some respondents considered the way religion is presented and public debates as the cause, others held the religion itself responsible, with its commandments, prohibitions, and all its teachings. The analysis of the interviews revealed approximately ten codes:

- Encountering archaic religious interpretations / Orthodox Islam

- Religion based on superstitions
- Observing practices carried out in the name of religion
- Witnessing fruitless religious debates on TV
- Those who speak in the name of religion
- Questioning rules established in the name of religion
- Distrust in institutional religious authority
- Religion itself

I categorized these religion-related factors into three main headings: religious debates on TV, the language of religion, classical teachings, and religion itself.

6.2.1.5.1. Religious Debates on TV.

The issue of religious scholars debating religion in front of the public emerged as a problem. On television, religious topics are one of the main subjects in prime-time programs aimed at the general audience. These programs typically address controversial or sensitive religious issues and engage in debates with opposing views. T6 blamed these fruitless debates on TV for the increasing atheism-deism tendencies, not only in IHL but also in general. "It creates doubts, then it can lead to atheism... Voltaire said the same thing during his time, that if the priests couldn't agree among themselves, how could the people understand... just saying 'I only believe'" (T6).

T16, a theologian, said that theologians love debating religion and criticized this behavior. "...We debate religion like supporting a football team. Some religious issues should not be debated in front of the media or on social media. ... Therefore, we need to take religion out of the realm of debate. This means theologians have a serious duty here, as do politicians and those managing religious institutions. Educators also have a serious responsibility" (T16).

The aggressive styles in these debates, with views that marginalize and cannot tolerate each other, believing that everyone outside their group is in hell and only they and their

followers are in heaven, negatively affect society. Young people perceive these as Islam and react against it. According to T7, "Actually, this is not Islam, but the youth recognize it as Islam or as being Muslim. And while rejecting it, they also reject Islam along with it. They cannot perceive the contradiction here" (T7).

T1 gave examples of these debates on TV: "Nonsensical views... For instance, a man appears on TV selling fireproof shrouds in the name of religion, like XXX. He says if you are wrapped in this shroud when you enter the grave, the torment of the grave will not affect you. He says come to the shop in XXX right now, it costs 370 liras. You go, and you buy it (laughing). When someone sees this... if he has a bit of sense as an IHL student, he would say, 'What is this?' Because they seem more honest to me. They get frustrated... they come to me saying, 'I'm fed up with religion, tell me something'" (T1)¹².

6.2.1.5.2. The Language of Religion.

The participants emphasized that the language of religion is wrong not only in religious education but also in TV debates. The language used by religious institutions and schools triggers atheism-deism tendencies. According to T18, these institutions adjust their language according to politics because politics uses religion as a persuasion tool. Religious institutions use an authoritarian language. "For example, when you use authoritarian language... it's like putting your hand under a smoothly flowing tap; it messes everything up. When authoritarian language is used for religion, the Quran says there is no compulsion in religion, but this compulsion is expressed through authority and inevitably causes reactions. In summary, some of these belief problems seem to be reactions to this authoritarian language" (T18). In Turkey, atheism-deism arises as a reaction to this authoritarian language, a reaction to the commanding language that is traditional and authoritarian. This language can also lead to traumatic

¹² The 'XXX' markings represent redacted identifiers to preserve anonymity. No material information has been omitted.

experiences in childhood and youth. The solution is to identify and address the causes of this trauma. Otherwise, we have no right to blame the child who distances himself from religion.

6.2.1.5.3. Classical Teachings.

Some participants who criticized the language of religion also criticized traditional teachings. The common point of these criticisms was that the traditional interpretations of religion no longer appeal to today's youth. T1 said that these interpretations, which he called old Islamic culture, were fed by old Turkish or Arab culture and were based more on fabricated hadiths than the main source, the Quran. It is a religious understanding that says, "If you believe, even if you do evil, it doesn't matter, you will be forgiven," and believes in miracles. Therefore, there is no need to strive to be a good person, it is a religion without effort. To be forgiven, it is enough to seek intercession from a sheikh. It is a religion mixed with the culture of every nation. However, Islam is not this; it is only what is stated in the Quran. According to T1, IHL means a place where young people are raised with Muslim, Turkish, and Sunni education. "IHL students... whereas being atheist means, according to young people, breaking free from this religious commerce and religious garbage. I think they are liberating themselves... the Islamic culture currently taught in IHL is this, and this is reacted to by young people" (T1). The traditional Islam taught in IHL does not meet the real needs of the youth because it is not natural. A young person who cannot find the answer he expects in religion distances himself from it.

T13, who criticized the confinement of religious education to traditional books, said that there should be a narrative that appeals to today's youth. This is a risky situation. "...So in such a world, no sane person would accept the risk of continually teaching a 100-year-old book" (T13).

Participants who criticized traditional or archaic Islamic interpretations, such as those related to women, said that these marginal interpretations, which are still prevalent today, are

particularly voiced by communities. A student who hears or receives education based on this does not want to identify with that identity.

T18 said that this archaic teaching is now over and its only effect is to distance young people from religion. "So, therefore, this... IHLs, with all their power, students, teachers, financial means, institutional structures... If even one student is moving towards the extremes we define negatively, protesting... it means your archaic traditional thought is over... if you still say, for example, that a woman should stay at home. If you still say this, that child says, 'I don't accept this...' When he says 'I don't accept this,' parents freak out and come to me saying, 'That child says this.' I say, 'What else is he supposed to say? That child is right, the problem is with you.' What else is that child supposed to say? I'm telling you the same thing. If you say that a woman's place is at home, like the Taliban. You say the same thing in Turkey, not under the name of the Taliban, but under another name, you're saying the same thing" (T18).

6.2.1.5.4. Religion Itself.

In addition to participants who criticized religious debates in public, the language of religion, and traditional religious teachings, a few respondents said that religion itself was the first and often the only factor in the atheism-deism tendencies. Among these respondents were both theology academics and atheist participants opposed to IHL.

These respondents divided atheism in Turkey into two categories: scientific-based atheism and theological-based atheism. They argued that theological-based atheism is the most solid form of distancing from religion. Those who become atheists based on scientific evidence are calmer and more optimistic about religion, while those who become atheists due to their interaction with religion tend to be more radical. Respondent T5 expressed this view as follows: "The most radical atheists are those who come out of Imam Hatip and theology schools. They are the most solid atheists. ... Conservative community members who become atheists and

deists are very firm atheists. Even if the world stopped and God appeared and said, 'Here I am,' they would not believe, saying it's a hologram. They are firm because they know religion" (T5).

According to these respondents, the more people know about God and religion, the more atheistic they become. The atheism quality of atheists emerging from conservative backgrounds is higher than that of scientific atheists. Respondents emphasized the secularizing effect of religion, saying that if you want people to become atheists, make them read the Quran. When asked if they meant religion itself or its interpretation influenced by culture, as some respondents suggested, they said it was religion itself.

"T5: The most important reason for secularization is religion.

The researcher: Religion itself, or people...?

T5: It is religion itself. No, no... leave that story. It is religion itself. It is the Quran itself. Of course, it is the Prophet himself. The most important reason for hating the Prophet Muhammad is his actions. The most important reason for rejecting the Quran is its content. ... Isaac Asimov has a saying, he said that the Bible is the greatest source of atheism when properly read. He uses the word 'properly,' I looked at the original source, 'when properly read.' So, atheism stemming from religion exists in the West too" (T5).

Participants who were against religious education or who were atheists also talked about reactive atheism. Those who were radical believers later became the most radical atheists. T17, who had worked at a high level in the Atheism Association, said this was a problematic situation. According to him, not everyone should become an atheist because, in Turkey, there are people who refrain from committing crimes due to fear of Hell. When this fear of Hell completely disappears, these people may commit crimes. "People should not distance themselves from religion or their beliefs out of reactions, but should do so by questioning and replacing it with something within the framework of reason... Because... when they leave religion and the philosophy behind it, I think they also leave morality behind. They cannot

replace it with something like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This makes them dangerous individuals" (T17).

T17 did not entirely dismiss reactive atheism as bad, but said it progressed very quickly, which was problematic. This situation lowers the quality. "Nowadays, even religious leaders advise their followers or students not to debate with atheists. They say, 'At some point, they will prove you wrong and lead you away from religion.' There is a reason for this because people come up with solid arguments. But when the quality drops, this doesn't happen" (T17).

The interviews showed that the most effective way this happens is through intense interaction with religion, getting to know it deeply, and becoming closely associated with it. Participants who saw this as a problem suggested different solutions. According to T18, religion is a search for a safe harbor, and those who teach religion should offer that harbor to the youth. Archaic discourses should be abandoned. T1 said that the solution is not traditional Islam or atheism, but a religion that exists between the two, which he called "natural religion," that will meet the needs of the youth and provide the morality that religion should give. This is the religion humanity is waiting for.

Thus, information on faith should be conveyed correctly and clearly to the youth. "... that is, knowledge should be defined and provided correctly, objectively, and truthfully. Correct and sufficient information should be delivered to those children, and everyone should take responsibility in this" (T2).

T5 argued that as modernization continues, the increase in atheism-deism will not stop, humanity will have a tendency towards secularization, and at least institutional religions will gradually weaken, and religious education will not be able to stop this.

Secularization emerged as one of the dominant themes in these interviews, frequently cited as a driving force behind atheism and deism tendencies. As modernization progresses, the interplay between secularization and technological advancements becomes increasingly

significant. In the next section, I will explore how technological factors, shaped by modernization, further contribute to these trends, creating a complex web of influences on the religiosity of IHL students.

6.2.1.6. Technological Reasons.

Technological developments were cited in all interviews as the primary trigger for nearly all the reasons presented. Starting with the Industrial Revolution and accelerating to an unimaginable speed after the millennium, these developments now touch every home and individual, affecting people, especially children and young people, in different ways. All respondents mentioned being an IHL student and the dual role of transportation/communication technologies, either positively or negatively. One or more of these ten codes appeared in all the responses:

- Communication and transportation technologies
- Social media
- Gaining easy access to information
- Encountering misinformation
- Information pollution
- Proliferation of information
- Exploring alternative information
- Learning about different lifestyles
- Discovering alternative lives
- Observing the diversity in religion

Technological developments have introduced both physical and virtual exposure to different religions, languages, and cultures. Access to differences has become extremely easy, and the range of differences has diversified. Young people encountered alternative information and saw alternative lives. They observed that not only are there different belief systems, but

also that the same religion can be interpreted differently in different societies. In short, the monopoly of values, beliefs, and moral norms of the society they were born into began to be questioned. These were facilitated by technological developments in transportation and communication.

Technological developments interact to varying degrees with all the atheism and deism reasons discussed so far. Young people in the age of doubt either looked for/found answers to their questions via the internet or encountered new questions. Advances in transportation technology facilitated student exchange programs, allowing young students to experience different countries firsthand. Similarly, advancements in communication enabled young people to quickly learn about and respond to things going wrong in their country or political mistakes via social media. Their ability to use technology better than adults made intergenerational communication difficult, disrupted the transfer of values between generations, and led young people to seek new idols. The answers provided by adults no longer satisfied the youth.

All respondents mentioned the impact of technological developments, especially social media, on atheism-deism. While some argued that this impact would lead to better outcomes, the majority saw it as an unstoppable flow. IHLs were insufficient to cope with this, and curriculum changes, updates in religious language, and the need for better teacher training were all made necessary, even urgent, by these technological developments.

"Atheism-deism is a problem of all ages, not just this era." Many subjects supporting IHL built their arguments on this thesis. In other words, atheist-deist movements have always existed, but increased access to information has made them more effective. In the past, it was difficult to access these ideas. Today, however, the rate of encountering these topics through social media, the greatest common denominator among students, has increased. An atheist on the other side of the world can ask a question to a child in Turkey. They can become friends.

They can video chat. The interactions are abundant. In fact, all belief systems are interacting with each other.

Respondents who attributed the distancing from religion in the West to an increase in religious knowledge said that the same phenomenon is currently happening in Turkey, with increased access to information via the internet also increasing religious knowledge. An IHL student not only became acquainted with other beliefs but also with different interpretations of their own faith. Because now, everyone has access to the verses and hadiths that are not mentioned or are hidden in religious institutions, IHLs, and/or theology faculties. "There is no way to continue hiding religious knowledge from the public. You cannot desecularize children with a phone in their pocket. Today, everyone is exposed to secular information and images in their homes, in their rooms... whether they are theology students, IHL students, or even imams. ... The more you know about religion, the more you distance yourself from it. The secularization of IHL and theology students is expected, even expected to be rapid" (T5).

Moreover, increased access to information has made it easier for young people to express these ideas among themselves and in society in general. Social media has also played a significant role in this. According to T13, it is normal for a person to have unanswered questions on matters of faith. To ask these questions, it is not necessary to contact an atheist or deist. Naturally, some questions may come to a person's mind. However, whether to articulate them or not depends on the situation. The current environment may be more encouraging in this regard. In this environment, where every belief is known and questioned, according to T7, "there is almost no such thing as blind faith anymore. Therefore, perhaps in the past... everyone seemed Muslim, and now, it seems like youth are in chaos! This is because... young people have access to everything. In the past, when the family said 'shut up! God will turn you into stone if you ask that question!' the child wouldn't ask and that was it. Now, there is no such thing. When the mother says 'shut up,' the child immediately goes online to find out what it is.

They can find detailed information. In other words, children have more opportunities to access information" (T7).

They see different worlds on the internet, they see types of relationships that the religion does not approve of and see that these are normal. This situation leads young people to question the current teachings because knowing differences opens the door for the young person to develop criticism against the religious relationship forms and beliefs taught to them. An IHL student cannot be isolated from this because they also have phones and computers in their hands. They have technology at their fingertips.

Moreover, in addition to communication, transportation capabilities have also experienced massive advancements with technology. Now, even religious families send their children abroad. And those young people see the modern world there: "Those children secularize. When they see the modern world, are you going to remain ignorant... will you turn to stone? No. They get used to the alternative lifestyles, flirting there, seeing that nothing happens despite flirting. It's over, just like that. You can wear a headscarf all you want" (T5).

The age of globalization has brought an unimaginable number of possibilities that make communication easy and fast. IHL students also desire the lives they see on the other side of the world. According to some subjects, official religious institutions, including IHLs and theology faculties, that exclusively teach the selected parts of religion could have been successful without technology. However, once young people encounter religious knowledge outside of what is taught, the influence of these institutions diminishes. T5 explained how internet technology has negated the impact of religious education institutions as follows: "The most secularizing agent is the internet. Because you see different worlds, different things. That is, alternatives... As people see alternatives, it makes it easier for them to develop a critical perspective towards what they have. Therefore, one of the most important agents of secularization and atheism is the 50-year-old radio, the 40-year-old television, the 20-year-old

computer, Google, and today's phone... which brings differences right to our pockets and hands. It's over. Because we see alternatives. Today, a young person sees how Western youth live. You can't stop this. I'm sorry, but you can't. ...the pluralizing effect of modernity" (T5).

According to T17, this is normal for an adolescent. When they see options different from the way they were taught as the only truth, they start to question. "You were taught something wrong, but other people act as if it is the only truth in their lives. You can ignore those people by labeling them as sinners up to a point. At some point, their lifestyles and behaviors will make you question. ... So this communication reduces differences" (T17).

Therefore, even if an IHL student is not an atheist, they no longer adhere to religious commandments. More precisely, in a period where alternative information is so easily accessible, being an IHL or theology student does not make a difference. The communication and transportation technologies that have become cheaper and more accessible with modernism provided the opportunity to criticize what is at hand because they saw the alternative. Seeing the diversity within the same religion even led to criticizing the religion. "You see that religion is not monolithic as religious people assume and present... The question of which religion comes to the fore... and the power of religion diminishes. Even the diversity within religion reduces its power. I think seeing the diversity within a religion is also related to communication and transportation technologies" (T5).

According to some subjects, there is a distance from religions not only in Turkey but all over the world. Islamophobia is spreading, and the wars and internal conflicts in the Islamic world also affect Turkish society and the children in IHLs (T16). The young person, who sees these examples in real life, sees the discourses of atheist-deist websites as more humanistic and universal, while not seeing the same values being advocated by Islam (T18).

Atheist-deista-d websites and social media take up a large amount of young people's time. The popular questions there catch their attention. However, according to T7, young

people do not put in the effort. They ask the question but do not pursue it. Generally, they are more influenced by popular culture. They are influenced by the movies and series they watch. This is a reflection under the influence of popular culture rather than intellectual influence.

This is a state of mental confusion. T7 claimed that this leads to an identity crisis. In the past, when communication was not so easy, the young person could reach very few people. They did what their parents said and were happy. But now, they are in a huge... information pollution, and they do not choose a path and follow it confidently out of this pollution. Under the influence of popular culture, they ask questions that are not theirs and not internalized. But they still feel Muslim. They do not know what they will encounter if they leave this culture and identity.

The identity-forming feature of religion has been greatly affected by technological developments. In traditional societies, there were ready-made identities that everyone from old to young adopted. The definition of good and bad, right and wrong, was shared. However, this is not the case today. Religion alone cannot form an identity. Neither can religious educational institutions. Because IHL students are also part of the flow on social media. Some examples there affect the young person's life, even if they are from IHL, and influence their identity. They also experience identity problems because there are no more ready-made identities. "Today, children and young people are completely on their own. There are many... many ideologies on the market. There are lifestyles, life forms... The child has to decide for themselves which is good, which is bad... and that is not easy. The problem of today's youth... young people are experiencing an identity crisis. That's why this is happening. And when there are bad examples of identities in front of them, it leads them to look for other identities. They develop a reaction and turn to something different, trying to create a separate path from their beliefs and others. That is the biggest problem of young people... We cannot provide ready-

made identities to well-rounded young people. We have left young people to themselves... they search and find for themselves" (T12).

According to some respondents, there are serious efforts, websites, and YouTubers working to impose these ideologies or different identities on young people. The solution is to provide the child, who is constantly changing and being built, with the correct information. A proper method and language should be used for this information to be effective. "Ultimately, faith is a subjective concept... But the important thing is that faith is based on objective knowledge, that is, science" (T2).

However, the majority of respondents agreed that this situation is an inevitable result of technological developments. The cheapening, diversification, and widespread availability of transportation and communication technologies, that is, modernism, lead to secularization. Secularization leads to atheism and deism. If societies modernize, they will secularize. Religious education cannot prevent this. Politicians are not successful in their efforts to raise a pious generation because they cannot control the media and communication technologies. "If politics can prevent anything other than the IHL curriculum on the internet, their project will succeed. But they can't. Let me repeat, politics... if they determine the Google curriculum as they determine the IHL curriculum... they will succeed. They can't do this" (T5). According to T5, who made the most assertive statements on this subject, the phone is what secularizes the world. "If I wrote a book on secularization, I would put this on the cover (showing his phone). This is secularization. Due to both direct and indirect reasons. It increases religious sources and alternative lifestyles" (T5).

In summary, the common consensus among almost all subjects was that technological developments, especially social media, are more effective on young people than religious education institutions. T5 expressed this most strikingly: "I am telling you clearly and plainly. If a child has a phone in their hand, religious leaders should cry all night! The biggest enemy

of religious leaders is not atheists, it is the phone. The child sees alternative religious knowledge and alternative lifestyles. ... A child with a phone in their pocket will never be desecularized by a herd of religious leaders in the next 1000 years. The only thing they should do is destroy technology" (T5).

Social media and the internet provided young people with access to different ideas, lifestyles, that is, alternatives. This led the young person to question their current truth or the taught truth. In the globalizing world, the young person who could not find a ready-made identity was left in an identity crisis. Although some subjects claimed that this could be overcome with proper education, the general opinion was that religious education in its current state could never succeed. In fact, more subjects expressed that religious education would no longer work in any way, and those technological developments, the modernization process, would naturally lead to secularization, which would result in an increasing rate of atheism and deism.

6.2.2. Hungary

The Hungarian phase of the interviews was conducted post-pandemic, with questions initially posed in Turkey and being enriched with insights gained from the Turkish experience. The primary goal was to gather participants' views on the influence of CSs and religious education on religiosity. Most respondents stated that CSs had no significant effect on religiosity. Those who believed that CSs had a positive impact on religiosity noted that they at least instilled moral values in young individuals and fostered engagement with the church community. Conversely, while some participants identified a relationship between atheism-deism and CSs, others did not perceive a clear connection. Overall, atheism-deism was not highlighted as a major issue within CSs. Instead, respondents focused more on moral values. Performing religious rituals within schools was not widely cited as a significant indicator of religiosity, as these rituals were part of the curriculum and often mandatory.

When it came to the rise of atheism and deism, respondents generally did not offer a clear idea about it. However, it was mostly mentioned that, as a societal trend, not only CS students but also many in society had been distancing themselves from institutional religion. This detachment was attributed to various factors, including the shortcomings of religious leaders, political influences, and the nature of religious teachings.

There was also a lack of consensus regarding the expectations and objectives of CSs, which created differing views on causes and outcomes. The predominant perspective on the purpose of CSs was to foster a sense of community and integrate students into the church community. From this standpoint, it was said that it was too early to assess whether this objective had been achieved.

Unlike the interviews conducted in Turkey, the Hungarian interviews highlighted the impact of CSs not on religiosity but on social cohesion. It was suggested that CSs might inadvertently contribute to class divisions, which respondents believed negatively affected social harmony. Participants emphasized this issue more than religiosity, noting that CSs might deepen societal divisions based on class and/or ethnicity. Interestingly, only a few respondents opposed the existence of CSs altogether. Their opposition was not rooted in concerns about fostering religiosity or promoting atheism-deism but rather in the perception that CSs reinforced social inequalities and ethnic distinctions.

This topic was subsequently included among the main themes emerging from the interviews. Notably, the differences of opinion among respondents were not as pronounced as the societal divisions they described. In particular, there was substantial agreement on issues critical of government policies. Although the Turkish interviews initially guided the process, the Hungarian interviews introduced unique topics and questions. Similar to the Turkish phase, new insights from experts were incorporated into subsequent interviews, which enriched the

dataset with additional questions and concepts. Consequently, some questions were not posed to earlier interviewees.

In total, 11 interviews were conducted in Hungary, with GT applied during both data collection and analysis. The key themes centered on three main aspects: (1) the question of the existence of atheism and deism in CSs, (2) diverse reasons underlying atheism and deism, and (3) the impact of CSs on social cohesion. The reasons for atheism and deism, as derived from the interviews, were categorized into five sub-themes: political, youth reasons, educational, and religious. These themes and sub-themes are elaborated upon with supporting evidence from the collected data.

6.2.2.1. There Is or There Is Not.

The question of whether atheism and deism are genuine phenomena in CSs was among the initial inquiries of this study. Participants generally did not perceive atheism and deism as a significant phenomenon. While responses varied based on religious and political affiliations as well as individual experiences, the overall analysis revealed that it was not a matter of primary concern for most experts.

Nearly all respondents acknowledged the existence of atheist and deist students among CS students and graduates. However, they overwhelmingly asserted that atheism and deism does not pose an imminent threat within CSs. Only two respondents expressed concern about what might happen to students' religiosity after graduation. Six experts noted observable changes in students' behavior and expectations from CSs, but they interpreted these changes not as atheism or deism but rather as manifestations of growing indifference toward religion or institutionalized religion, influenced by modernity.

A Few but Present: Respondents, especially teacher respondents, did not report a sharp rise in atheism and deism among their students, though they acknowledged its presence. Some students, they noted, entered RSs already identifying as atheist or deist. H1 observed that some

non-religious students attended RSs for reasons unrelated to faith, yet still participated in religious activities, often to avoid standing out or opposing the majority in a class of 30.

Four respondents suggested that while students might not exhibit atheist and deist tendencies during their time in school, some could adopt these views after graduation. Many expressed uncertainty about what would happen to students' beliefs in the future. Even if students were religious at the time, it was difficult to predict whether they would maintain their faith as they move on to university or encounter challenges in their personal lives. Religious educator respondents emphasized teaching basic morals and principles, acknowledging that outcomes remain uncertain. They believed that, if students worked hard and stayed committed, they might continue along their religious paths.

Despite these challenges, respondents saw their mission as significant, even if students later became atheists. Their focus was on imparting values that might remain with students regardless of their faith journey. H2 mentioned that when encountering former students who had distanced themselves from religion, he avoided attempts to change their views, prioritizing positive relationships instead. He believed this approach might eventually influence their perspectives over time. "...And maybe later on this will change, so. If I try to do my best and. Um, talk about my attitude, my opinion, but that... that's all so" (H2).

A Broader Perspective: Another perspective shared by experts was that the observed phenomena might not necessarily be atheism or deism. Young people identifying as atheist or deist often did so not as a result of philosophical inquiry but due to other factors. Many of these claims lacked an intellectual foundation. Modern lifestyles and increasing access to worldly pleasures further distanced CS students from religion. As material desires and their accessibility grew, adherence to religious principles diminished—not just among CS students but across society. This phenomenon, however, was not characterized as atheism and deism but rather as the marginalization of religion in everyday life.

Interviews revealed that only a few participants acknowledged the positive or negative influence of CSs on religiosity. Most argued that CSs were no different from other schools in this regard, with no measurable impact. Some emphasized that changes observed among youth were not due to atheism or deism but were part of a broader trend of modernization—a universal phenomenon. Those who believed CSs negatively affected religiosity attributed this to overexposure to religion during school, which some suggested increased the likelihood of atheism and deism.

The themes of secularization and desecularization were either absent or mentioned in passing during interviews. However, the individualization of faith and the declining influence of institutional religion were highlighted by a few respondents as issues affecting society at large, not just CSs. These trends were attributed to modernization and the rapid dissemination of information.

While the initial focus of the interviews was on the impact of CSs on religiosity, the findings raised more questions than answers. Another central theme emerged, similar to the Turkish interviews, was the reasons for atheism and deism in CSs. Some respondents refrained from discussing this, as they did not believe CSs had any significant influence on religiosity, some others mentioned it. The identified reasons for atheism and deism were grouped into four sub-themes: political, educational, religious reasons and the youth factors. Yet, additional questions emerged beyond these issues.

As an outsider researcher, I felt compelled to follow these new questions in subsequent interviews. This led to the emergence of a third theme unique to the Hungarian phase: the impact of CSs on social cohesion and segregation. Religious schools, rather than shaping students' religiosity, were perceived as influencing the structure of society, either positively or negatively.

It is essential to note that these themes are not mutually exclusive or contradictory. Instead, they are interconnected, often with one theme stemming from another.

6.2.2.2. Political Reasons.

The term "political reasons" in this dissertation refers to the factors behind atheism and deism in CSs that were directly or indirectly, and consciously or unconsciously, influenced by political actions. Over 10 codes were identified and categorized under this theme. Nearly all participants referenced at least half of these codes during the interviews. The selected codes under this theme include:

- Identification of power and religion
- Religious language in politics
- Politicians using authoritarian language
- Rejecting political identity
- Increase in the number of CSs
- Financial and administrative autonomy
- Church-state collaboration
- Reacting to political influence on education
- Aligning with conservative and traditional values
- Criticizing the politicization of religion
- Skepticism toward institutional religion
- Polarization in religious communities
- Questioning the role of religion in politics

One of the most frequently discussed topics was the relationship between the state and the church and its impact on CSs and their students. Almost all respondents acknowledged the presence of this relationship, emphasizing that it has grown stronger, especially under the current government, and has also influenced CSs.

Respondents addressing the connection between religious education and politics first highlighted the structure and role of CSs within the education system. Interviews revealed that the position of CSs in the educational framework, their operational model, and their ties to the church complicate their relationship with politics. Many CSs are directly linked to a church or religious order, introducing a third actor—the church—into the dynamic between religious education and politics. This also increases the differences between public schools and CSs. To better explain this relationship, respondents first elaborated on the education system itself. Following a similar structure, this chapter will first discuss the CS system and then analyze its relationship with politics.

The political reasons discussed are categorized into three main areas: the church school system, the relationship between religious education and politics, and impact of church-state involvement on people and students .

6.2.2.2.1. Church Schools System.

Historical Context and Autonomy: Church Schools hold a unique position in Hungary's educational system, primarily due to their historical background. These institutions were closed during the Communist era but reopened after the regime's fall, with their properties restored. Interviews reveal that CSs currently enjoy greater financial and administrative autonomy compared to state schools. While all CSs are part of Hungary's educational system, their management practices differ depending on the church, religious order, or denomination to which they belong.

Like the churches that they are affiliated with, CSs also differ in their educational aims. H10 highlighted that one denomination might prioritize textbook-based knowledge, while another focuses on building a sense of community. Some orders attempt to balance both goals.

Variability in Governance: Due to their affiliations, CSs exhibit significant diversity. As H8 remarked, "As a church school, they are very different. There are very different types

of church schools. And we... are different from other schools. So, it's... it's not so homogeneous."

Some CSs are governed by religious orders rather than the state. In such cases, members of the religious order—such as sisters, fathers, or nuns—not only teach but also manage these schools. H1 recounted his experience at a school managed by an order, where he underwent a rigorous interview process: "...and they asked me... I had to translate from the Holy Bible, from Hungarian into English and things like that..."

Certain orders operate RSs in multiple countries, enabling priests to rotate between institutions based on institutional needs (H3). However, some CSs change denominational affiliation for economic or social reasons, with stronger orders often preserving their schools and enhancing both their quality and quantity.

Despite their strengths, religious orders face challenges, particularly a shortage of priests. When priests are available, they often teach religious subjects and serve as mentors, addressing students' personal concerns. However, lay teachers frequently take over religious education in the absence of priests. As H3 explained, "The order is... not very strong. There are more... strong... there are stronger orders. In Europe, they are getting weaker... because... the number of new Fathers... That's not so popular. They don't get new newcomers in the order... So it's really difficult."

Comprehensive Education: Some CSs offer education spanning kindergarten to university, allowing students to stay in the same institution for up to 16 years. Students in such schools often take their school-leaving exams at 19 or 20 years old. H4 described their school as a complex that includes a kindergarten, primary school, elementary school, secondary grammar school, music school, and high school. Other CSs specialize in specific subjects, such as music or sports (H6).

Originally all-boys schools, many CSs have gradually transitioned into co-educational institutions. Similarly, schools that initially only offered high school education have expanded to include lower grades. H8 noted that they started accepting primary school students about 30 years ago, and 15 years ago, they became a co-educational school.

As a result of this system, CSs enjoy significant independence in various areas compared to state schools, which participants highlighted as a positive distinction. They have the autonomy to make decisions regarding finances, curriculum content, teacher recruitment, and the usage of school facilities.

H1 explicitly stated: "...Church schools... are quite independent" (H1). This independence, distinguishing CSs from other schools, can be summarized under the heading of administrative freedom. This includes aspects like financial management, building usage, and teacher appointments. "They can have more freedom with the number of lessons... the teachers' duties and the money. -They have more? Yes, they have more" (H1).

Curriculum Content: While CSs must adhere to the national curriculum, they have greater flexibility in structuring lesson numbers and assigning teacher duties. H1 highlighted this flexibility, noting that CSs can adapt their methodologies and content beyond the rigid frameworks of state schools. H8 emphasized this point by discussing the broader societal role of CSs in Hungary, adding that they can operate more independently.

H11 also remarked on the lack of methodological freedom in state schools, where teachers are restricted to using one approved textbook per subject. In contrast, CSs can experiment with new teaching methods and materials, reflecting their greater autonomy in education. "This freedom to decide and try out new methodologies," H11 noted, "is a unique aspect of church schools in Hungary."

Teacher Appointment: Church schools independently hire teachers, often prioritizing religious devotion. H1 recounted his interview process, conducted by nuns. Participants in

administrative positions in CSs expressed their independence in hiring teachers. They described the characteristics they look for in a teacher and under what circumstances they would terminate employment. They have the right to set their own criteria for hiring teachers. H8 explained that while being religious is not mandatory, it is an advantage: "...It's (being religious) an advantage... We are looking for teachers. We invite our teachers to be part of the community... to be members of the community, and if they say, 'No, I'm not interested,' then... and we probably... wouldn't take them as teachers because they should be open..." (H8).

H10, a school administrator, stated that they primarily select teachers based on how they teach. Additionally, teachers are expected to accept and actively participate in religious life. "So there's no possibility that they don't go to services, or if I send them a devotion and ask them to do this or that... that they would say no... this is not what... what they can do" (H10). H3 mentioned that while 90% of their teachers are devoted Christians, they might hire less religious teachers for subjects hard to staff. Non-religious teachers, however, must show openness to religion and ask students to pray before continuing with the class, even if they do not pray.

Participants emphasized strict hiring criteria. They either avoid hiring such individuals or terminate their employment. If the teacher says Catholicism is bad, H8 can say, "You cannot teach in our school because you are against our religion, and it's... it's normal" (H8).

Financial Freedom: Financial structures vary widely among CSs. While some rely solely on government funding, others—particularly those catering to higher socio-economic classes—receive substantial support from families and alumni groups. Some orders, directly connected to their denomination, even use denominational funding to supplement teacher salaries.

Although the government provides uniform per-student funding and sets standard salaries, some religious orders supplement these resources, enabling schools to offer additional

benefits, such as gifts for teachers on religious holidays. H3 described this dynamic: "Yeah, it depends on what kind, because this is... the school for... Well, subsidized by a religious order or led by a religious order? And those can have lots of priests, like... Fathers..."

High-quality CSs without robust denominational support often depend on donations to cover expenses not fully funded by the state. While tuition fees are not collected, families are encouraged to contribute to a foundation, which funds activities like school trips and retreats. Contributions are family-based, not per-child, and families unable to pay are accommodated to ensure no child is excluded due to financial hardship. Wealthier families typically contribute more, while others can apply for grants for costly activities.

Monetary Management in Church Schools: Church schools' administrative independence extends to financial management, contributing to their economic adequacy. While both state and CSs receive equal funding from the government, state schools often struggle due to bureaucratic inefficiencies. H3 explained:

"The problem might be that state schools are governed by a body. Church schools are more independent. For example, if we want to build something, we don't have to ask anyone's permission. If we have the money, we can do it. We can rent out our rooms, like the gym, and earn money. State schools cannot do this. They have administrative problems and bureaucracy. I worked in a state school when this system didn't work well. Now, they have to ask for permission for everything, and they cannot keep the money earned from renting out facilities. Church schools, on the other hand, can keep their earnings, which makes them more effective" (H3).

Church schools can purchase items or fund projects without external approval. This is not the case for state schools, where every purchase requires approval from a higher authority. H3 noted that small schools lack staff to manage finances and accounting. That's why districts and administrative bodies were formed for these schools. These bodies decide on financial

matters, leaving state schools without independence. In contrast, "it is not a problem here, so you know. Our old photocopier broke down... we will buy the new one. And that's it. So we don't have to ask permission for... anyone... So we do that" (H3).

H11 highlighted that this centralization in state schools began in 2013. Before that, local governments managed schools, allowing more adaptability. After centralization, decisions became entirely top-down, limiting schools' flexibility to address local needs.

H8 elaborated on both the pros and cons of this financial freedom. While state schools can hire teachers without worrying about their salaries, as these are paid directly by the state, church school administrators must carefully consider the financial implications of hiring decisions. This includes weighing the costs of employing experienced teachers, who command higher salaries, against their budgetary constraints. On the other side, church school leaders must prioritize spending, deciding where to spend. H8 highlighted the advantages of this autonomy: "I can decide what is important... to change the windows or buy some computers... They cannot decide. For them, everything is decided by the government" (H8).

Funding Sources of Church Schools: Many participants highlighted that the financial sources of CSs are a subject of public debate. Those who oppose CSs for religious reasons or due to dissatisfaction with the government often argue that the state allocates a larger share of the budget to these schools. They claim that this results in better buildings, more advanced classrooms and laboratories, and more qualified teachers, ultimately leading to higher-quality education in CSs.

However, most interviewees refuted this claim, emphasizing that the state allocates equal funding to all schools. They clarified that while CSs might have additional income sources, the base funding remains the same. Participants who have worked in or are currently working in CSs stated that these schools receive the same amount of funding from the state as public schools. The government does not differentiate between school types when determining

per-student funding or teacher salaries; the same framework applies to all (H1, H3, H4, H8, H10 confirmed this). H8 explained: "Who's financing the religious schools in general, or this one? Government... is financing religious schools... 100%... paying the salaries and everything... And also with the other churches, it's the same. Church schools... should be financed at the same level... as other schools." Similarly, H5 confirmed: "We don't have more money. Now we receive the same data. Same money, same money that the state school... Salaries and everything natural... No, it's not no different."

While CSs receive equal funding from the state, they also benefit from additional financial resources from families, foundations, or alumni networks (H3, H4, H6, H8, H10). H2 mentioned that CSs often rely on multiple sources of support. Teachers' salaries, for example, may be paid by an order, the church, or the state, depending on the primary supporter. Parents also contribute significantly. H2 shared that in their school, parental backing through a foundation supports both the school and the teachers. Additionally, textbooks are provided free of charge by the government.

Church schools enjoy greater financial independence partly because they have these supplementary income sources. Especially well-established CSs receive support from alumni associations and families. Denominational CSs are supported by their affiliated communities, orders, or denominations. In some cases, these orders cover teachers' salaries and renovation expenses. As H2 described: "...and everything else is... paid by... the parents... the meals and... any other things... But mostly the support comes from the financial support from the order... or the church... But some fields are supported by the government... so the government buys books for state schools... But the main support is coming from the orders... and families and... a little bit from the state... it is the third supporter..." (H2).

While securing additional financial resources may not be easy for every CS, schools with a strong historical background or significance often succeed in obtaining funds. H8

illustrated this with examples of projects funded through European Union grants: "For example... we try to collect money for our purposes from parents, from former students as well. But that's not a great amount... We can apply for projects of the European Union as well. In the last 15 years, we had about 1000 million forints with these projects. For example, we... have a new school laboratory. We built a new kindergarten... Or we renewed the dormitory... Or we had finances for pedagogical programs, projects."

Generally, well-established CSs are supported by an order or the church. Some of these schools also receive equal funding from the state, like public schools, giving them a substantial income. Others rely mainly on their affiliated order or church for primary financial support. H4 noted that additional funding for CSs often comes in the form of renovation grants: "...and this is where the church schools receive more than... than state schools. So, the... the government supports church schools more than... than... state schools in... maintenance. This school needs repairment..."

This additional support often stems from the historical value of CS buildings. Many were originally CSs before the Communist era and were reopened after its end. Given their age and historical significance, the state provides funding to preserve these buildings. In some cases, rebuilding the school would be cheaper than renovating. H8 elaborated: "...the renovation of school and... It's a question... what could have happened if the state... government would not have financed the renovation itself. It would have been very... very expensive because this is an old building and we don't have a gym, only a small one. And with this huge building, if we have to renovate it, it's... it's much... much expensive, much more expensive than to build a new school. Because we have... so it's very complicated..." (H8). While H8 did not elaborate on the complications, they later mentioned off the record that the historical value of the building motivated the government to maintain its function as a school.

CSs are more likely to receive positive responses when applying for renovation or repair funds: "The... the separate... the support is when... that we can apply. I mean they are... open to give us financial support, for example in... form of grants or... If there is an obligation for, I don't know, renovations or different programs or they, I think it's a positive thing if you are a church school, but I don't think that it's extra" (H10). There are cases where CSs receive buildings from local authorities without paying rent. In return, they take responsibility for maintaining, renovating, and improving these buildings by adding facilities such as gyms or conference halls (H3).

H10, with a sense of guilt, admitted that CSs' applications are more likely to be approved compared to state schools, though this does not guarantee approval for every request. H8 echoed this sentiment, questioning: "So if the... the government would have financed it... Should I have said it's not good because... Because we are a church school and... and... do I have to shame myself because the government helps us? I would say no, I don't have to shame myself... because I'm... I... I have the responsibility for whole... for our city and I... I want to... to have the other schools and when and why to... to have the... the best school... in the city... not in the sense of... In in the sense of being an example, I want my teachers to do the best to make the best pedagogics, but I want to share this experience with other schools. So that every student in this city could have the best school that is possible..." (H8).

CSs with additional income sources often provide teachers with gifts on special occasions, even though their base salaries are the same as public school teachers. Some teachers reported receiving annual bonuses or practical gifts. H1 shared: "...for example, for Christmas... we always got some money... as teachers. And... and it was quite a big amount of money or we could get vouchers to buy books... Or... When it was very hard for the whole economy and for the school as well, we got washing powder and cocoa and things like that for

Christmas. It was very useful and everybody was very happy... It was a good idea. Felt that we are accepted and they... they could rely on us and we were important..." (H1).

However, not all churches or CSs have these advantages. H6 noted that many are financially struggling, stating that most churches lack the funds to support their schools. He expressed surprise at how these schools manage to operate: "I... I have no clue how they can manage." H1 highlighted that some CSs lack large chapels and must use physical education rooms for holy masses.

The financial situation of CSs varies significantly depending on their location within Hungary. H6 explained: "I mean the schools... where they are. It makes... very big differences... And because of this normative support given by the state, we can say that if there are less and less children in a school, then you get less and less money. So, those schools are... really have to struggle with... And this amount of money is not enough for the whole school year as well" (H6). While the support is equal, elite CSs tend to attract high-achieving students, which increases their funding. However, poorer CSs often maintain large class sizes, around 35 students, to maximize state funding. Smaller class sizes could jeopardize the school's financial stability.

Several participants noted that churches take over schools not because they have ample resources but because they value education. They also face particular financial challenges. In many cases, these schools are located in small communities and would have closed without church intervention. H6 claimed that in Hungary, "it doesn't really matter whether you are a state school or church school, you really struggle with financial things... And for... to have enough kids... So, in this way we are really the same" (H6).

Churches that take over schools from the state often use extra funds for renovation rather than directly supporting teachers or students. H10 explained: "The money they (state) give to the school... gives to the school... it... it is enough just for the... everyday life... But

big, big renovations... it's not. So, when the church takes it, it is not supporting the salaries of the teachers or it doesn't give more for the students... but it's more like keeping the church building, building a playground... because they have money for that" (H10).

There is ongoing debate about the financial sources of CSs. Although they receive the same amount of state funding, the general populace often believes they receive more. H4 clarified: "It is because... because they see every church school is renovated beautifully. Yes, because of that... but the teachers didn't receive more. The... the... so... state pays... many... many... misunderstandings... mainly financial questions" (H4). H10 suggested that the extra income of CSs comes from the church itself, not the government: "The government doesn't give extra for the church schools. It's the church itself... from buildings, rent, or other businesses."

Finally, a few respondents claimed that financing is not transparent, not only in education but across the country. H11 argued: "I think even the churches don't know because, sometimes, local groups of a church get state money. And I'm not sure whether they have an accounting system within the big churches where this appears."

6.2.2.2.2. The Relationship Between Religious Education and Politics.

The way CSs operate positions them as key actors in the intersection of religious education and politics. To fully grasp their political implications, it is essential to first examine the relationship between church and state. From the first interview, many respondents highlighted the intertwined nature of church life and government in Hungary, which H1 criticized as a negative dynamic, advocating for clearer separation.

Respondents contrasted the positive relationship between the current government and CSs with the hostile environment under the socialist regime, where even basic economic support for these schools was insufficient. As H6 stated: "The political system now... it is a known fact that they... they support the church and church schools" (H6). All agreed that right-

wing governments, including the current one, have consistently supported CSs. While a few argued that this support is largely financial, most respondents emphasized its social, political, and cultural dimensions.

Despite Hungary ranking fourth among European countries in non-religiosity, respondents noted that the number of RSs continues to grow due to strong governmental support. This support reflects the values of the ruling party, which places significant emphasis on Christian faith. For instance, respondents mentioned that the Prime Minister's speeches frequently highlight Christian values. However, while the opposition debates whether CSs receive disproportionately higher funding, most respondents expressed confidence that they do not. Instead, they argued that the government fosters a favorable atmosphere for church membership, making it appear beneficial. Some respondents criticized the oversimplification that equates supporting the ruling party, Fidesz, with being Christian, suggesting it ignores the diversity of Christian voices in the opposition. They further criticized the government's use of common enemies, such as migrants or George Soros, as a divisive tactic that contradicts Christian principles.

Orbán's rhetoric often emphasizes Hungary's responsibility to preserve traditions and foster national unity. According to respondents, he advocates for collaboration between the church and state to strengthen Hungarian communities both within and beyond Hungary's borders. H11 pointed out the existence of an "unwritten agreement" between politics and churches, particularly the Catholic Church, which has supported Orbán and Fidesz for over two decades. As H11 remarked: "There have been countless examples of... of priests who, during mass, tell people for whom they should vote" (H11).

Some respondents noted that churches' close ties to the government grant them privileges, such as access to resources and decision-makers. For instance, in some areas, a Parliament member may also serve as a church member, providing "up-to-date information"

and support for church initiatives. However, these relationships also pose risks, such as financial dependence on the government, which could compromise the church's mission. Respondents expressed concern about implicit expectations placed on churches during election periods. While the government does not explicitly dictate sermons, subtle pressures exist, particularly when bishops encourage congregation participation in elections. Still, some pastors strongly supported the government, pointing to its financial aid for schools and buildings, which caused tension within the church. This dependency may lead to implicit expectations, especially during elections, further deepening divisions within churches between government supporters and critics and creating a more polarized environment.

Orbán's vision for Hungary intertwines Christianity with national identity. According to H11, the government views CSs as institutions vital for instilling Hungarian values and traditions, particularly those centered on family and gender roles. H11 recalled him asserting that church-state cooperation is fundamental in "building a strong line of defense" to preserve Christian and Hungarian traditions for future generations. To preserve Hungary's Christian and national heritage. Efforts to restore historical churches and schools, as well as build new ones, reflect this broader vision.

Political Tensions and Education Quality: While the government's support for CSs is evident, respondents observed that this relationship has deepened tensions within communities and families, yet hasn't stopped religious practices. Disagreements on faith's role in governance have widened divisions among Christians, a shift from the unity seen during the communist era when external opposition rather than internal discord was the focus. As H10 explained: "If you... if you think about... the way I think about faith and the government, you are a good Christian. If... if you are not, you are not a Christian. You... you can't see things normally; you are not realistic or you are too liberal. Because of it... the division between Christians I think... much wider than it used to be" (H10).

Orbán's vision of Hungary is deeply intertwined with Christianity and national identity. Some of the respondents also referred to Orban's speeches. According to them, Orban speaks of church-run institutions, such as schools, hospitals, and elderly care homes, as vital to society and supports state funding for these establishments to promote education, culture, and social care.

This situation was commented on as state's also support on CSs. Many respondents stated that this support varies depending on the ruling party. "Actually... depends on the government. The government now gives everything... It wasn't the case at all times... This government supports church schools. So, it is not a problem... that there was a time when we got less than state schools because if you want to send your child to a special school... then why don't you pay so... that... that was the attitude" (H3).

Examples of political influence on CSs were shared by many respondents. H1 expressed shock at a politician delivering a speech in a church after a Holy Mass: "I was shocked! And, you know, people were singing and attending the holy mass like... like sheep. And then the politician appeared. Everybody lined up and... Yes! Yes! I was frightened how they transformed. That emotional situation to that... I think it is a big mistake to let politics into the church" (H1).

Another visible example was the frequent attendance of politicians at the opening ceremonies of the academic year in CSs. Most respondents disagreed with this practice, though some accepted or were happy with it. H6 mentioned that Prime Minister Orban attended the ceremony at his school years ago but has not been seen since. H1 noted that school opening ceremonies are broadcast on television every academic year, and in recent years, they have often been transmitted from CSs. "Well... I think when politicians proudly declare that... they are... Roman Catholics, Protestants, something it is... Seeing that... politician in the church" (H1).

Respondents also described the frequent attendance of politicians at CSs' opening ceremonies, with mixed opinions. H1 noted that these ceremonies are often broadcast on television, typically from CSs, reinforcing their close ties to the government. After checking online, H3 confirmed that Prime Minister Orbán often attended CSs' opening ceremonies in consecutive years.

Respondents highlighted Orbán's emphasis on using schools to promote Hungarian identity, with church-run schools serving as key vehicles for this goal. However, some participants reflected on the unintended consequences of this approach. H4 noted a shift in the educational environment after the government and the church became natural allies with Fidesz, particularly after the turn of the millennium. Teachers perceived as government critics faced challenges. For example, H1, deemed "too liberal," was summoned to the director's office after an election loss by the ruling party. He recounted being asked, "Where do you put your axes?" by the nun who directed the school.

Many respondents, including CS supporters, acknowledged the government's significant financial contributions to CSs, particularly for infrastructure improvements and building renovations. They described how funds are often allocated to restoring old schools damaged during the Communist era, reflecting the government's belief in the high quality of pre-World War II education. However, they argued that this funding does not directly address educational content or teacher salaries. H5 shared an example of their school receiving one billion forints to renovate a dangerous dormitory, which had not been updated for 80 years. "The dormitory of the school hasn't been renewed for 80 years..." H5 explained. "It was so dangerous that we asked for... the money." However, they clarified that these funds were strictly for infrastructure, not salaries or resources. Moreover, they point out that this funding is not unique to CSs and argue that each school can apply.

Nearly all participants expressed a similar sentiment: the current government supports CSs in one way or another. This support can vary—economic, political, or social. As H6 argued: "The government now gives everything. But there was a time when we got less than state schools because the attitude was, if you want to send your child to a special school, then why don't you pay?" Similarly, H2 explained: "Yeah, we do have some... some kind of support from the... the closest government, so like this... district where we belong to. So... they can also give us some support, but yeah, it depends on the... the party, the... it is... the better. They are kind of a more conservative party or liberal one. So... the amount of money we get depends on... the government... So which party is in power..." (H2).

Support for CSs does not only depend on the government but also on the local mayor. H2 shared that they are "in general" happy as a CS, although the level of support varies based on the political ideology of the mayor. H2 explained that it was much better when the district had a conservative mayor, but this changed with the election of a liberal one: "...it changed to a Liberal one and then we experienced that... We are not supported anymore. So, you know, it is... it is completely like that so... it is not... only who is the minister or Prime Minister... but depends on... mayor also... If you are religious, you give more religious schools. If you are liberal, you give less... and more of the others" (H2).

H2 also introduced the concept of "economically forced religion," arguing that insufficient support from liberal mayors or governments pushes CSs to rely more heavily on religious orders or churches for survival. "Economically, yes," H2 said. "At least... economically forcing... absolutely."

The quality of education in CSs is also influenced by their relationship with the state. Respondents pointed out that critical thinking persisted until the turn of the millennium. Since then, as the government became more closely aligned with the church, educational practices

have faced subtle political influences. H4 emphasized that these influences might affect teachers who do not support the government, further polarizing educational environments.

Overall, respondents highlighted the complex dynamics between politics, religion, and education in Hungary, emphasizing both the benefits and challenges of the close relationship between CSs and the state.

Reasons for Support: Respondents frequently claimed that a relationship between the church and the state exists but is not openly articulated. The reasons why politics is so intertwined with the church and CSs were explained by those who accept this support through several key factors.

One reason for this connection is political. H1 described the dynamic as mutual: "...this connection is mutual. I give you something; you give me your votes. ... So, the government is supporting these religious schools to get votes... very simply, yes. But it is more... sophisticated. Not verbalized... Mutual agreement, but no words" (H1). Due to the government's support, religious individuals, who predominantly send their children to CSs, feel more at ease under the current administration. In turn, they support the government. "They don't want them to lose... So at least... the government provides maybe not financial support... but a kind of comfort... comfort zone and you don't feel threatened. ... Of course, definitely it's a... it's a... I wouldn't say the privilege, but it's... it's a positive thing if you belong to a church. So... it's a cool thing right now" (H10).

Another reason for the support is the alignment between right-wing governments and the values promoted by CSs. These schools endorse moral values that align with the government's agenda. H3 elaborated on this connection: "Gender... gender matters and... and things like that. We say that the mother is a female, and the father is a male, and a marriage consists of one man and one woman... and it is not questionable. Because... The Bible is the basis... And I think the majority of Hungarians support, you know... the traditional views...

But there is a very, very loud minority... which isn't satisfied with that" (H3). However, this does not mean the government aims to create a devout generation but rather a traditional one. Regular church attendance is not essential; instead, adherence to traditional values is prioritized.

When asked about the reasons behind this change, H2 attributed it solely to ideology: "-What is the reason that you think? Only the ideological. -I think so, yes. I think so" (H2).

Right-wing governments view CSs as role models in education, which is why they aim to expand these schools' influence. CSs provide a distinct model—different teaching approaches, pedagogical models, and educational philosophies—that goes beyond the standard curriculum: "The right-wing governments... as they are based on conservative worldview... think that this is... more important... this expanded role model of teachers, expanded role model of education at schools" (H9). CSs transmit conservative values, and for some respondents, it is not surprising that conservative governments prefer this pedagogical approach. They indicated that they understand the reasoning behind this preference.

Some participants highlighted the close relationship between the government and the church as an underlying reason for this dependency. For these respondents, the government views the church as a partner. H2 reflected on this relationship: "The government is interested in the churches, and somehow... they can cooperate well, or they friend each other. They do have the connections I guess, since they want to use them. But I don't... I cannot look... I have a... have a deep look. Is this only the surface... you know... You hear this and that, but... It's not that much. ... Well... maybe it is moral reasons to spell that the government wants the... the people who have... stronger moral background. And they can do that by the church or... You know, they... they do have some interest" galiba (H2).

The superior quality and specific educational approach of CSs are also cited as reasons for the support. Their graduates often work in government positions, as some CSs are elite

schools. A few respondents suggested that, while the government does not explicitly praise RSs, they are seen as instruments for guiding the nation in a unified direction. This approach is believed to benefit society by shaping good students into good citizens. H2 noted the government's interest in raising the next generation through elite CSs. These schools are viewed as critical for producing future bureaucrats and leaders, ensuring not only academic excellence but also strong moral values: "...so... not only make them academically good and talented and... well-educated... but also morally give them some kind of good background..." (H2).

However, support for CSs extends beyond nurturing morally and academically prepared youth. H6 described the government's approach as strategic politics rather than discrimination: "(laughing and turning to me) It's not discrimination, it's politics. This is how politics... it was the time for the Socialist government... Then it was the... the other way around... these schools were closed" (H6).

The prime minister's stated goal of raising a religious generation was met with skepticism by some respondents. H6 questioned its sincerity: "But sometimes we... you know, we are hesitating to believe whether it's true or not. So, whether it's just a slogan, you know... just to yeah... But he's also saying that... he's also saying... our Prime Minister says these things that if you want to become really European, we... we need to be Christian as well. So that's why... that's why..." (H6).

While acknowledging that CSs provide high-quality education, some respondents found the government's favoritism unacceptable. They argued that the government is responsible for supporting all schools equally and that prioritizing one group over others is contradictory. H8 expressed frustration: "Yes, and we shame ourselves sometimes when we hear them speaking... that... they... are coming and saying yes, our schools are better. We have to... support them" (H8).

Participants emphasized analyzing the country's political climate to understand this relationship. They suggested examining election results, as the political landscape reflects societal views. H1 noted a paradox: "The number of non-religious people is increasing, so... in that sense, these schools shouldn't be successful... But... At the same time... these politicians are still winning.... It's really like a puzzle, with no clear picture" (H1).

In general, most respondents agreed that CSs benefit from political support, which influences parents' decisions when selecting schools for their children. Many families, perceiving that CSs receive greater financial backing and offer better facilities, choose these schools in pursuit of improved education and brighter futures for their children.

There are two distinct societal groups with differing expectations of CSs. H9 elaborated on these ideologies, explaining how they influence perspectives on education. One segment of society views CSs as institutions for transmitting content and graduating students, while the other sees education as a tool for transmitting values, not just knowledge. According to H9, almost everyone agrees that a school without value transmission is incomplete because school papers, teachers, and classmates inherently communicate and transmit values. However, one part of society believes the values transmitted by CSs are outdated and old-fashioned. This group is politically aligned with the conservative right. H9 also acknowledged that CSs mirror the social diversity present within society.

Given this societal diversity, expectations of CSs vary. The government, the main church, and local churches each have distinct aspirations for these schools. H10 referred to these aspirations as "hopes" rather than "goals":

"On one side, the state, of course, wants to cultivate good citizenship. I think one of the main reasons why church schools really exist is that most people associate religion with good behavior or ethical standards. And one of the things the government hopes to achieve is reducing future problems with citizens and guiding them in a single direction. From the

government's perspective, this is advantageous because a unified set of values makes governance much easier compared to a society with diverse opinions and values" (H10).

The church leadership, on the other hand, hopes to reclaim schools confiscated during the communist era and reconnect students and teachers with the church. This might involve observing church holidays, participating in fellowship events, or attending services. The school pastor can act as a bridge between the school and the church, facilitating this connection. In smaller communities, there is a significant effort to organize events for schools, parents, teachers, and everyone affiliated with the school, creating a sense of a single, united church.

Additionally, there is hope that future church members will emerge from these schools. For local pastors, this represents an opportunity for mission work, inviting people to church and revitalizing congregations. Many churches face challenges such as aging memberships and the migration of younger generations to cities. Through these efforts, they aim to ensure the church's growth with new members (H10).

This diversity of expectations highlights the complex role CSs play in addressing the needs and aspirations of various societal stakeholders.

Conflicts Between Church and Government / Government's Version of Religion:

Some participants highlighted the discrepancies between the teachings of the Bible and the government's interpretation of religion, referring to it as "the government's version of religion." Migration was often cited as an example of this conflict. Three respondents emphasized that the Bible encourages helping those escaping terrible situations—"not building walls but opening gates." However, many equate Christianity with protecting the nation against people of different faiths, a perspective they argued does not align with biblical teachings.

While some individuals accept the government's version of religion, others reject it. This disagreement rarely leads to significant tensions, but two participants mentioned facing

backlash for criticizing the government. For instance, they noted that some write articles praising the government while disparaging dissenters, viewing them as immature in their faith.

H10, a church member and religious studies teacher, expressed discomfort with the politicization of faith, saying, "I feel my faith cannot be a tool. When they say 'our Jesus,' 'our Bible,' or 'our Christianity,' I just don't like it... Jesus came for all. True Christians should see that the government is not God's hand... Even when I quoted the Bible to disagree with the government, people said I was naive or unrealistic." H10 further described their frustration with the use of Christianity in political speeches and reflected, "I'm really curious how God sees this whole thing. Probably in heaven, I will ask Him."

In a related discussion, H1 analyzed the church's relationship with politics:

"-Do you think the church has the option not to let politicians get involved?

-They should.

-But then they cannot be that rich, right? So, it's a kind of win-win.

-Yes, but there is a moral line under which... I think they mustn't go. But they... they do it."

While some respondents claimed that religion has become a tool of politics, they also highlighted instances where the church resisted governmental pressure, particularly in education. Respondents noted that churches do not always align with the government's expectations, occasionally opposing its actions in unexpected ways. Church-affiliated respondents suggested that public misunderstanding of Christianity often leads to misinterpreting the government's actions as aligned with Christian principles.

One significant conflict between the church and the government arose during the 2020 changes to the national curriculum. Respondents highlighted widespread outrage, particularly among Hungarian language and history teachers. CSs played a prominent role in this opposition, collectively criticizing the curriculum as substandard. The inclusion of nationalist

authors of lower literary quality alongside Hungary's most celebrated writers was a key concern. H4 explained, ""The problem is that... the only thing that can be said for him is that he's nationalistic. He is... he's not a good writer. So that's... that's why the outcry was not because he was nationalistic, but because he's a third-rate author. These weren't political problems with the new curriculum. These were aesthetic and cultural problems... Aesthetically, it isn't up to quality standards" (H4).

When the opposition began, the government dismissed critics as "liberal scum." However, the stance of CSs created a significant challenge: "The value system of church schools isn't compatible with the new national curriculum, which is more nationalist," H4 noted. This unexpected resistance was described as a political blow to the government, which had extensively funded CSs. According to H4, the government likely assumed financial support would ensure compliance, but many CSs openly disagreed, stating, "yeah well thank you for the funding, but this is not OK" (H4).

As a result, many CSs and individual teachers resisted the curriculum changes. Responses varied—some schools allowed individual dissent, while others prohibited group actions, potentially due to funding concerns. Ultimately, the new curriculum became mandatory, leaving no room for further opposition.

Some respondents did not participate in protests or strikes organized by teachers' unions. H3 remarked, "There are several different teachers' unions, but I don't follow them. Sometimes I hear about protests or strikes, but we're not involved in that."

6.2.2.2.3. Impact of Church-State Involvement on People and Students.

CS Students and Politics: The close relationship between the church and the government rarely manifests directly in the behavior of teachers and students within CSs.. Respondents described only a few examples of how CSs navigate the intersection of politics, religion, and education. One notable incident involving students was shared by H1:

"Students were sent out during lessons on a school day to tear down the posters of the non-wished politicians... By school teachers!! I saw them on the street and I asked them what they were doing there, and they said that... a teacher sent them out. I couldn't believe it! It was a very crowded street... big traffic. If there was an accident! It was school time, and they were tearing the posters, political posters... non-wished politicians. It happened. It is my experience. ... With this... I think they are making a connection between the bad doings of politicians and the religion... because... they know that... that person is supporting this school" (H1).

However, such overt examples of political engagement were rare. Most respondents, particularly teachers and principals, emphasized that educators generally strive to keep politics out of the classroom while addressing social and cultural topics in line with church teachings. Sensitive issues, such as homosexuality or political debates, are often handled carefully and informally, as students frequently raise questions about current events. For teachers respondents, balancing church principles with students' curiosity is a challenge, particularly in today's information-rich environment where young people are well-informed through the internet.

Despite these challenges, respondents stressed the importance of engaging thoughtfully with students' questions to create a space where they feel heard and can explore complex issues without discomfort or division. By doing so, they aim to respect the religious framework of the school while fostering open, inquisitive dialogue.

H2 acknowledged the growing challenge of keeping politics out of education, as students are influenced by their parents and external discussions. Despite dissatisfaction with the political environment, he valued being part of religious education, believing it offers students a better and more supportive environment than other schools. "I'm aware of these difficulties, especially political ones... the political background... and I see a lot of negative points in it... and I'm not really satisfied with it at all... but still I think... I'm happy to... to be

part of the... the religious education. Because they're... they're... the environment they provide... for the students is better than the other schools... It is perfect. So yes, even if it's like... supported. Why didn't they?" (H2).

Church school related respondents described two distinct scenarios within CSs. In one case, a government advertisement appeared on YouTube during a class, and the teacher intervened loudly to prevent students from hearing it—an effort to distance the classroom from political messaging despite the school's church affiliation. In another instance, they observed that high school students often focus heavily on academic results, choosing schools based on university prospects. In such settings, skilled teachers avoid political discussions by staying focused on lessons and deflecting potential political topics, ensuring the classroom remains apolitical.

Additionally, some teachers in CSs openly support the opposition but keep their political views separate from their teaching, maintaining a professional and neutral classroom atmosphere. This balancing act highlights the efforts of educators in church-affiliated schools to navigate the intersection of religion, politics, and education, creating spaces where students can learn without undue political influence.

The question arises: how does church-state involvement affect people and students in CSs? Due to political support for CSs, many believe these schools receive more state funding than public schools. This perception equates the church and state in the public eye, making them share both merits and faults equally. Nearly all respondents agreed that this situation primarily harms the church and CSs.

Regardless of worldview, most respondents acknowledged an implicit agreement between the church and politics. However, this relationship negatively impacts religiosity. Many claimed that political support for religion is not necessarily advantageous because when politics is intertwined with religion, any political failure reflects poorly on religion. As one

respondent (H11) explained, "They (politics and religion) are somehow mixed because... I don't know about Turkey, but in Hungary, leaders of the churches do not speak out... if they do not speak out against the corruption of the government, for example, or something... So they condone everything the government does in exchange... more money. This is what people see" (H11).

Young CS students are also affected by this dynamic. Politicians who act against religious principles while presenting themselves as religious are not unnoticed. This inconsistency undermines their credibility. One respondent (H1) used a Hungarian saying to illustrate this point: "...you dance how would... the owner whistles, we say in Hungarian. ... You dance... How would the owner whistle... Even if you don't want to dance, there is the money... You follow owners. So, the government has... the state has the money and gives that money to... They whistle and the church... dances. And this affects the students also. And I think parents maybe..." (H1).

Such dynamics can make students either less religious or push them toward fundamentalism, seeing loud displays of religiosity as a means to gain power. As H1 noted, "If I am louder, if I say loudest things than the others... if you are more fundamental already... So, how loud you are... that's big money you will receive. So... it is kind of... competition among the schools... or churches. ... But I think that... The faith is never, never loud! And, if I see loud, loud believers, I'm very suspicious if it's true or... if it's a play" (H1).

Some teacher respondents, even those affiliated with the church or CSs, opposed church-state involvement. They suggested that some students share their skepticism: "Yes, and you can't believe governments... So if they support something, it means... that thing... must be wrong... Be careful! Look behind the things" (H1).

Government support for CSs is sometimes interpreted as forced religious education (RE). Respondents pointed out that teaching only one religion in RE classes could be coercive.

The RE curriculum in Hungary differs from other European countries, as it is often more nationalistic. One respondent remarked, "This thing which we have right now... was implemented with a political purpose. And many... and many church leaders are... are also opposed to this... on the grounds that... that the... personal part of religion goes away by making it mandatory. So... that's why... that's why some church leaders are opposed to this..." (H4).

Moreover, some participants noted that the increase in CSs has not led to a rise in the number of religious individuals. "A lot of state schools are becoming church schools. ... But just because the church manages the school doesn't mean that the population, children, and parents are becoming practicing Catholics. So, I think it's the schools owned by churches that are increasing, not religiosity" (H5).

Respondents emphasized the importance of high-quality teachers, the integration of religious practices, and parental choice in ensuring effective RE in CSs. Traditional CSs tend to meet these criteria, but newly converted schools often struggle. Without these elements, RE fails to achieve its goals or support government aims. Despite the post-Millennium alliance between the church and government, unchanged teaching quality prevents CSs from becoming propaganda tools.

Respondents who are supportive of the government blamed opposition parties for not being good enough. Though they agree with most of the political decisions of the government, they also criticized its statements on religion. They reflected on the political narrative in Hungary, which is promoted by the government. The government puts emphasis on Christian values and presents itself as a defender of these values, positioning them against what it perceives as a Western European loss of such principles. This narrative has been effective among many people in Hungary, as it reinforces a sense of national identity tied to Christian values. However, they highlighted that this narrative does not necessarily translate to a direct connection in people's minds between their personal faith and political ideology.

"...old students, for example, do not like the main narrative of the government. They feel a little bit... hypocrite and a little bit.... too pushy... this... this narrative... And they choose the personal connection to the community... and I think among the young people, the authenticity... and... and... to have personal relationships... to have personal connection with church... with other communities is more important... than to participate in a political narrative" (H5).

Despite this, in times of uncertainty, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and economic challenges like the petrol crisis and embargoes, many prefer the security and strength offered by the current government. This preference stems more from a desire for stability and protection rather than genuine support for the government's ideological stance.

Respondents noted similar patterns in other European countries and Turkey, where right-wing parties gain support due to promises of protection and national strength. They also mention that the opposition in Hungary is perceived as weak and even clownish, failing to present a credible alternative during crises. Consequently, even if young people see through the hypocrisy of the current government, they often choose to support it, not out of ideological alignment, but because it appears to be the only viable option for providing leadership and safeguarding the country. Otherwise, the students of CSs do not support the government's ideology and politics in return for its support to CSs. For H5, politically, students are not dependent.

The influence of faith on perspectives about the relationship between government and religion varies depending on worldviews. H10 said that some people view strong government-religion ties as divinely ordained, citing biblical teachings about governance and authority as gifts from God. They believe this connection enables the free practice of faith and socio-economic prosperity, describing it as a "special time" provided by God (H10). Conversely,

others argue that merging spiritual and political authority often misaligns with Christian teachings, potentially undermining the faith's core values.

Since 2010, particularly under the Orbán government, religion has become increasingly integrated into public life. Efforts to promote church-run schools have compelled individuals previously indifferent to religion to examine churches' societal roles and teachings. However, conflicting messages from churches and the politicians—emphasizing love versus making offensive or divisive statements—have created confusion, causing some to question which interpretation reflects Christian values. For many, real faith remains personal, with organized religion viewed skeptically. Government efforts to promote churches may alienate people further, driving them toward private spirituality rather than institutional affiliation (H11). "This may have... had a contrary effect because people... If their teachings and... and other statements... are... are coherent or not... because you have the people you know who talk about Christianity as the religion of love on one hand, and then you have these conservative Christians who have... anti... anti human statements about other people that are just... I don't even know the word for it. They are just disgusting. So, this is not coherent... these are not coherent messages" (H11). Moreover, Hungary's religious diversity complicates the government's focus on the Roman Catholic Church, alienating non-Catholics and those disengaged from organized religion.

Most respondents claimed that government support for CSs influences parental interest, with families believing these schools improve job prospects for their children. Yet, few respondents noted that CSs vary in their impact. While some students continue their faith without reflection, others become critical of religion after attending. Secular schools can better accommodate religious families, as faith-based activities can occur outside school. However, CSs may marginalize students of different faiths, making them feel excluded by practices

aligned with a specific religion. This creates challenges for inclusivity in church-run institutions (H11).

Dissatisfaction with political messaging in churches predates 2010, said some respondents. Many, particularly older individuals, believe churches should prioritize spiritual over political matters. This discontent has increased the "religious in their own way" demographic—those who believe in God but remain unaffiliated with any church. "So this can also turn people away from church. And... and even if it doesn't increase the number of atheists, it does increase the number of people who are the... the category of religious in their own way.." (H11). Although 70% of Hungarians believe in God, far fewer are active church members.

Additionally, some participants argued that the government's favorable stance towards CSs affects the voting behavior of religious citizens. H6 mentioned: "I mean... they experienced the same that they voted for Orban because they had the feeling that something bad will happen to the church if we didn't vote for Orban. And so, it's out of fear, not because he's the best ever. Yes... leader, but yeah, it's out of fear" (H6).

There is debate over whether CSs foster conservative voters. While opposition supporters criticize this, one respondent (H9) dismissed the claim as politically motivated, noting that many CS graduates hold diverse political views. H9 also explained that while right-wing governments tend to favor CSs, teachers in these schools often face heavier workloads without higher salaries. In rural areas, CSs often serve marginalized communities under difficult conditions, aiming to improve educational opportunities for disadvantaged students.

6.2.2.3. The Youth Factors.

The second category of reasons for atheism and deism, focusing on age and family, is categorized as Youth Factors. This section includes themes related to youth and family dynamics, such as the age of doubt, tendencies to question, the influence of negative role

models, the role of family, family types, and motivations for choosing CSs. Together, these elements form the "Youth Reasons" category, which encompasses more than 10 distinct codes linked to the theme. At least half of the participants referenced at least half of these codes. The codes selected within this category are as follows:

- Protesting
- Contradictions of Religious People
- Inconsistency of Adults
- Disappointment Caused by Religious People
- Negative Religious Role Models
- Reaction to Religious Moral Understanding
- Difficulty of Religious Rules
- Trust Issues
- Questioning Authority
- Existential and religious doubts
- Reacting to hypocrisy in religious figures
- Inconsistency in religious practices
- Diverse family backgrounds in schools
- Seeking moral and behavioral education

The connection between CS students' age, their reactions to religious teachings, and exposure to negative religious examples was largely consistent among respondents. Most agreed that adolescence naturally prompts questioning of authority and rules. Participants highlighted that students, regardless of school type, tend to question their surroundings, values, and beliefs during this developmental stage. Additionally, growing up in a more liberal society fosters religious skepticism and distancing from religious norms.

Discussing these topics was generally unproblematic in Hungary. There was no hesitation in addressing age-related reasons. These factors are categorized under four main themes: Age of Doubt and Questioning, Negative Religious Examples, Family Pressure / Family types, and Reasons for Preferring CSs.

6.2.2.3.1. Age of Doubt and Questioning.

Nearly half of the participants identified questioning and doubt as age-related phenomena. When discussing CS students, respondents referred to young individuals navigating a psychologically and sociologically complex period. They emphasized that questioning religion and authority is a natural part of this developmental process, which may lead to either distancing from religion or deepening religious commitment—a process that often continues until the ages of 21–22 or beyond.

H5 and H6 noted that students frequently pose challenging questions during weekend camps, addressing topics such as the existence of suffering, the necessity of prayer, and the existence of God—especially when confronted with personal or societal injustices like the death of a young person. These discussions often revolve around existential questions about the presence of a creator and the concepts of heaven and hell.

During adolescence, students who previously accepted parental and educational teachings without question begin to re-evaluate their beliefs. H9 observed that students show greater interest in existential topics related to identity, purpose, and the future rather than academic subjects like chemistry or history: "Our students don't mind chemistry and... or... 2nd world war... they... they are not interested... Firstly, they are interested... who I am... and why I am here and... What I... will do with my... with my life?" (H9)

Students also question religious taboos, including restrictions on abortion and sexual behavior. H8 mentioned that homosexuality arises as a topic in CSs, albeit cautiously. While emphasizing the importance of acceptance, he acknowledged that church teachings oppose

such behavior. Discussions about homosexuality in some CSs are limited; teachers may address it privately, but external organizations are not allowed to discuss it within the school, whether in a positive or negative perspective. H8 said that though the homosexual behavior is not good, who is responsible for the children is the parents. "They are responsible for it, not the school. We are not allowed to speak about it." (H8)

Conflicts between real-life experiences and religious teachings often trigger questioning. For instance, the Catholic Church opposes in vitro fertilization (IVF), yet some Catholic school teachers have children conceived through IVF. Some respondents recalled student discussions about such topics referencing letters from the Hungarian Bishops' Conference on family values, where students struggled to understand the Church's stance.

H10 highlighted that teachers often refrain from providing definitive answers on complex topics like creation, ethical dilemmas, or homosexuality. Instead, they share personal experiences and the faith community's teachings, fostering open dialogue rather than rigid doctrinal defense. While core principles—such as respect for God, the importance of prayer, and appropriate church conduct—are conveyed, students are encouraged to explore their own thoughts.

While educators generally found these discussions manageable, parental reactions posed occasional challenges. Diverging views among parents, whether liberal or conservative, influenced how schools approached sensitive topics, and sometimes made it complicated.

The Church supports such dialogues through educational materials, including middle school textbooks that incorporate stories, real-life examples, situational games, and provocative questions. The goal is to cultivate critical thinking and guide students in applying Christian values to questions not explicitly addressed in scripture, fostering an adaptable, reflective faith.

H1 emphasized the unpredictability of adolescence and cautioned against evaluating educational outcomes solely based on this life stage. Instead, they advocated for assessing long-

term effects by observing individuals' adult lives, including their relationships and family dynamics: "So... I saw all of them... So... I wouldn't... I wouldn't be able to give a recipe... What happens to what? Plus... this age, you know they are in their teenage years. It is unpredictable what happens to them... I would say that after 25 or 27 years... It must be... So later on... I would... I would examine that adult life. So, you know when? Because when they are teenagers, they just... do something else you want just because... It is not a good way of measuring, but later on how they treat their husbands or their children or whatever is with their lives. I think this is the real value of education later on" (H1).

6.2.2.3.2. Negative Religious Examples.

According to most respondents, many students who turn away from religion do so primarily because of negative personal experiences rather than philosophical conflicts. Disappointing encounters with priests or teachers—individuals who present themselves as religious but behave inconsistently with those values—can deeply disillusion students. This disillusionment often stems from at least one significant negative event, leaving a lasting impact that makes it difficult for them to maintain their faith.

Disappointment in individuals or church practices was frequently cited as a common reason for students to leave religion. Students struggle with the paradox that the church is both considered holy and composed of fallible, sinful members. For some, it is hard to reconcile the belief that the church, regarded as sacred because it belongs to God, can harbor individuals who commit moral failings. The concept of the church as the body of Christ—with Christ as the head and members representing different parts—is complex and challenging to grasp. As one respondent noted: "...all the members of the church are like a body, with Christ as the head and all others as different parts of the body. Some parts commit sins, but they still belong to the head. There is some holiness in them because they are connected to the holy one... And it is very difficult to understand that... It's difficult even for me. Now I try to understand." (H3)

H5 highlighted that students often observe the lives of nuns and priests around them, raising questions about the meaning and purpose of dedicating one's life to God. They ask nuns about their experiences, seeking to understand what it truly means to live such a life. Moreover, students notice hypocrisy within the church and its members, recognizing that priests and others in religious roles have their own sins, weaknesses, and imperfections. This observation leads students to critically evaluate the authenticity and integrity of religious life. As H5 emphasized: "...they can see... they can hear... from the life... the life of the those around them... and the priests around them... and they all have sins. They make mistakes... They have their weaknesses... So, that question why they sacrificed their life to God and to the charity and to the good things... if they aren't able to... to do... the ideas. Yes... to... to realize that dreams... so, I think it's very important" (H5).

H3 suggested that students turning away from religion is usually not directly caused by the school itself. However, when schools contribute to this shift, it often stems from perceived hypocrisy. When authority figures claim to be devout but fail to live according to their teachings, students notice the inconsistency, leading them to question the value of religious faith: "...the children are rejecting religion because of their seeing... These are holy people... Community is committing sins..." (H3).

Even respondents who identified as pious highlighted contradictions within religious orders. For instance, while they preach poverty and obedience, their actions often suggest otherwise. They observed that members of religious orders may present themselves as modest yet possess modern phones, cars, and other luxuries—a discrepancy that does not go unnoticed. This gap between religious ideals and contemporary practices is seen as a betrayal of the values promoted in the Bible. Respondents argued that such inconsistencies undermine trust, as people are told one thing while witnessing contradictory actions:

They further argued that these contradictions are leading to a societal shift where people start to believe without adhering to religion. "So... people are becoming... becoming like ... believing without religion... The act of the churches... and religious orders... are kind of... leading people to that way... because of the difference between acts and the words... Yes, they are not sincere... in a lot of cases. They say that you must accept... the foreigners... you know. But Jesus said, if you open your door in front of a stranger, a foreigner, and... You know, the end of the story... and what? What is the... political life doing nowadays? Close all the gates, close all the doors. It is not what we are taught about... Bible" (H1).

Interestingly, those who leave religion after graduating from RSs often have a deep understanding of it. They know the doctrines thoroughly and understand the weaknesses in religious arguments, which allows them to challenge and critique it effectively. "People who are... graduated from religious schools who become atheists... they're really good atheists. ... The best ones, yes:)) ... Because they know everything about religion and they know how to... Kind of can attack those things... That's kind of... weak points of religion" (H2).

6.2.2.3.3. Family Pressure / Family Types.

Family is the most important reason that children attend CSs. And families who choose CSs for their children are often described by respondents as either upper-class or lower-class religious families. H3, an educator at a school located in an upper-class neighborhood, noted that after the school building was relocated to this area, the number of students tripled, and the families' economic status improved. H3 stated, "...And... I would say the quality is better, so we can get in most classes, we can get more devoted religious students than we used to have before" (H3).

Parents who are part of a church community or follow a religious order or movement mostly send their children to CSs affiliated with their church. If a CS is supported by an order,

the order often supports many families as well, leading to a significant number of students from these families attending the school.

In CSs with a high proportion of religious parents, there is also a notable presence of large families. CSs known for their devoted religious environment particularly have large families. H3 elaborated: "By large it is not three, as the government says that three is a large family. How many... it depends... I think the biggest is 10, now that we have ten children. They are not coming from low socioeconomic status... The reason is... Well, they are Catholic. Accepting life is kind of Catholic tradition. ... We cannot say no birth control... not exactly but... There are ways that the church prefers natural family planning. And you have moral reasons to... to restrict the number of your children so. Just because you don't want to work more, it's not the right reason. ...of course you have to be responsible, but. You know both of you are healthy and. Have the means to provide for your children. Why not so?" (H3).

These families can have more children because they tend to be more stable, with both parents present and committed for life. However, there are also single-parent families, and their numbers are increasing. Despite this, many CSs still have a good number of stable families with multiple children. While divorce is not common, even in devotedly RSs, there are divorced parents.

However, religiosity is not always the primary factor for upper-class families. Some non-religious parents choose CSs for moral education. H9 noted: "That means... Um, only... only... in my opinion only 40... According to our studies... research... only 40-50% of all religious schools' students are from religious backgrounds" (H9). There are students who are not Christianized, coming from diverse family backgrounds. Some of these students even choose to be Christianized while attending CSs.

For some respondents, family types in CSs are highly diverse. There are rich and poor families, religious and non-religious. The gap between those practicing religion and those who

do not is significant. H5 reflected on this diversity: "We have... children from... upper class... in the same class with Romas and with the laborers' families. And we have to manage this situation. ... It's very difficult to... to go with this to those spectrums... differences..." (H5).

CSs host students from laborer families, many Roma students, especially in kindergarten and primary school, as well as children from Catholic high society, including politicians, doctors, lawyers, and economically privileged families. Some students encounter religion for the first time through the school's exposure to the Catholic Church, priests, nuns, and religious literature. Others come from families deeply involved in the Catholic Church, attending services regularly and actively participating in their communities.

The presence of students from diverse socioeconomic and religious backgrounds creates challenges for teachers, particularly religious education instructors. H6 explained: "For the religious education teachers, it's really hard because there are so many differences in students that, for example, one goes to the holy mass every week and the other doesn't know whether God exists or not. So yeah, it's... really hard task" (H6).

6.2.2.3.4. Reasons for Preferring CSs.

Respondents identified various reasons why families from different religious and economic backgrounds prefer CSs.

Religious Factors: The primary reason parents send their children to CSs is to nurture them within a religious tradition, aiming to instill strong religious values. Families who are religious desire their children to actively practice their faith. "These families are really happy with religion... and want their children to have religious life at... early age" (H2). Most parents seek to strengthen their children's moral foundation and to have some help to raise them according to the values they cherish. CSs serve as institutions that educate children in line with familial expectations.

However, not all families choose CSs for religious reasons. Some respondents noted that certain parents are not particularly religious. H6 found it interesting that the religious acts and ceremonies, which were once more compared to today, were considered too much and overwhelming by the families. "Yeah... they felt that... Oh my God, it's too much! They are praying all the time or things like that... So... we had to sit down and think of new activities, new ceremonies... which fit nowadays' children more... So... we had to adapt to today's culture and families" (H6). Moreover, some families do not prioritize religious courses as they do not directly contribute to university admissions.

Behavioral Factors: The second common reason for choosing CSs is their ability to teach proper behavior. The religious background of CSs assures parents that the school will guide children beyond academics, fostering discipline and moral development.

"Sometimes there are very vicious or poorly behaved kids... and parents think that... if you go to that church school, you will learn how to behave... because there is discipline" (H1). Parents believe that CSs can raise their children better than themselves. "I sometimes hear such reasons as well... that I couldn't set a good example. Then I will send my kids there and they will teach him..." (H2). H6 explained that parents observe the dedication of teachers in handling disciplinary issues, which strengthens their trust in CSs. Some families prefer CSs to protect their children from harmful habits, such as drug use. H9 stated that not all families are necessarily religious, but they choose CSs to protect their children from bad habits, such as drug use. "There is a common idea of church schools that they are... angels, the students, not children. It is not true, of course" (H1).

Financial independence also appeals to parents, as CSs can manage funds effectively and secure additional resources: "Financially, church schools are pretty well equipped... the school building, the area, the best facilities... it's really stable financially" (H10).

CSs aim to build strong communities, providing secure environments that attract even non-religious parents seeking stability for their children: "Our school has a really good reputation, and parents want their kids here because they know we take care of them. Maybe religiosity isn't the most important thing, but they trust us" (H6).

Educational Experience and Curriculum: The third key factor is the quality of education. CSs are renowned for high academic standards, especially bilingual institutions. Some are considered elite due to specialized programs in languages, arts, or sports: "I wouldn't call the school elite, but the bilingual class is definitely elite. High academic standards... out of 24 students, 10 had excellent grades... all fives. ... So that is 40%, a bit more than 40%" (H3).

CSs associated with religious orders are often elite, producing graduates who excel in government, civil leadership, and academia: "Our graduates became... like... explorers... researchers, and they traveled a lot... and they wrote books. They were kind of famous people. And... because of it... these schools were really, really famous... lots of their students became really, really influential people. So that might be one of the reasons why people send it to school" (H10).

Religious education is typically limited to two hours per week, but CSs offer diverse religious programs, including retreats and camps integrated into the school year. "A lot of families think that... it would be... for this... this... more extracurricular events, the more opportunity to have trips and so on and more..." (H9). These extracurricular activities also enhance CSs' appeal as families appreciate CSs for fostering moral values, academic excellence, and community belonging. H2 stated that parents with positive experiences in CSs, whether through older children or personal attendance, want their younger kids to benefit from the same environment. CS is a place for them that nurtures both academic and moral growth while preparing them for future success.

6.2.2.4. Educational Reasons.

Another theme affecting students' religiosity, as identified in the interviews, is education. Some interviewees attributed this to the educational system, while others placed less emphasis on the role of CSs. All participants, however, agreed that education plays a role in the transmission of culture and values. They noted that CSs either contribute to or should aim to contribute to this process. Despite this consensus, respondents highlighted that factors beyond schooling are often more influential.

Furthermore, the impact of CSs on religiosity can be both positive and negative. According to the respondents who support CSs, the quality of education in CSs is not enough to increase the religiosity of students, and thus, there is a need to improve it. They believed that this positive impact is generally dependent on certain conditions. Respondents who talked about the positive impact of CSs emphasized that this depends largely on the student's openness to it. In many cases, older and more established CSs are deemed more effective in fostering religiosity, whereas newly established or recently converted CSs fail to achieve the same impact. Merely changing a school's name does not automatically make it a CS capable of instilling religious values. On the other hand, critics of CSs argued that while the quality of education in these schools is indeed lacking, improving it is inherently challenging due to the nature of religious education itself.

Respondents frequently emphasized that students' religiosity is primarily shaped by their family and church community, rather than the school itself. Students with a strong religious foundation at home or within their community are more likely to maintain their faith. Without such a foundation, CSs alone are unlikely to instill religiosity. While rare instances of spiritual awakening may occur, these are exceptions rather than the rule. As one respondent explained: "If the students... have already an established community at church... then they will

be religious. If they don't, the school will not convert them to be religious. So... it's all about their background, not the school" (H4).

Overall, the respondents stated that if CSs lack a strong church support or connection, not only religious education but also the general quality of education decreases.

The interview analysis identified more than ten codes related to education, including:

- Class teachers
- Priests/Fathers
- Religious rituals
- Two hours of religious classes
- Teaching style
- Negative teacher behaviors
- Educator quality
- Teachers' religiosity
- Content of religious education
- Lack of explanations for deficiencies in religious teaching
- Teachers' rights and challenges
- Integrating religious rituals into daily school life
- Adapting religious education
- Creating a community
- Diverse student backgrounds and beliefs
- Balancing academic and religious expectations
- Linking Christianity to national identity

For almost all respondents, two key educational factors contributing to the rising trend of atheism and deism in CSs were the quality of teachers and the curriculum. These factors were seen as pivotal in shaping a school environment that either supports or undermines

religiosity. This section explores these aspects under two main headings: teachers and curriculum.

6.2.2.4.1. Teachers.

Teacher Quality: Respondents emphasized the critical role of teachers in RSs, particularly those teaching religious education and priests. Well-educated and capable teachers are essential for fostering a positive learning environment and addressing students' doubts effectively. Teachers play a vital role in shaping students' experiences and maintaining their connection to faith. "So, religious schools... all of them... they need really well educated teachers. Teachers are the most important part... in those... schools... especially the religious education teachers and the priests. So they... they do have... a basic rule, a vital role in this" (H2).

Class teachers, in particular, hold considerable responsibility for their students' spiritual and personal development. According to H3, class teachers organize religious and cultural celebrations, such as lighting advent candles, celebrating Christmas, and exchanging gifts. They also lead class trips, morning prayers, and communal activities during meals, fostering a sense of community. In the religious education class every student has to discuss different topics like moral issues. H3 said that because of all of these, how a class teacher is devoted is very important. The class teacher organizes programs for their students, and this is their duty, "because this is the way of how we do this personal care thing and build a community" (H6).

One essential quality for teachers, as noted by several respondents, is authenticity. H5 explained that students can sense when a teacher speaks truthfully, which directly impacts their receptiveness to the subject. An authentic teacher, who openly shares their own doubts and questions, fosters trust and engagement. Authenticity means acknowledging personal struggles, exploring doubts alongside students, and addressing questions sincerely. As H5 expressed: "We aren't omnipotent... But if I'm authentic as a teacher, I think... and... I have my struggles

in my life, and I have my doubts, and I have my questions... I can answer the students as an authentic teacher with my questions, with my doubts, I say well" (H5).

H10 further highlighted that teachers are not expected to provide definitive answers to every complex issue, such as questions about creation, ethical dilemmas, or homosexuality. Instead, they focus on sharing their own experiences, the teachings of their faith community, and the broader principles of their religion. These principles include respect for God, the significance of prayer, and appropriate behavior within a church setting. Teachers aim to create an open dialogue, allowing students the space to explore their thoughts and raise questions. This approach balances the delivery of core religious principles with an openness to individual exploration.

Flexibility is another key feature of CSs. H7 noted that RE teachers can adapt their lessons to align with students' interests and questions. While teachers must adhere to a general syllabus, they can adjust the content to engage students better, even if it means not completing the curriculum. "The goal isn't just to complete the syllabus but to bring students closer to God" (H7).

However, most participants stated that, in any case, the best religious education would be provided by priests. Priest teachers also serve as mentors to students. In the past, particularly in older orders, all the teachers used to be priests. However, this became increasingly impossible over time: "Till 1990, most of the teachers were religious fathers as priests. But after that... it has changed because this and the priest order disappears fathers. They reopened other schools and split them into different schools across the country. And as part of that, they have a few new priests. Every year... we have four priests in the school who are teaching. We have four" (H8).

If Teachers are not Good: The quality of teachers is important in all types of schools, but it is even more significant for CSs. When teachers are not sufficient, it reduces the quality

and it diminishes the overall impact of these schools. H4 argued that many religious subject teachers in CSs lack pedagogical training, leaving them unprepared to address challenging questions from young students, such as those about the creation story or the existence of God. Without proper guidance, students may struggle with these complex topics. For this reason, H4 stated that he preferred to discuss these topics with his children at home. For instance, H4 shared how his daughter, while discussing topics like abortion and euthanasia in religious studies, felt scared due to the way these sensitive issues were presented. Discussions on such topics need to be handled with care and tailored to the students' age.

A critical challenge identified by respondents is the unclear identity of religious studies as a subject. H4 noted that religious studies in CSs often lack a coherent focus, combining elements of culture, dogma, and spirituality without a unified approach. "...religious studies doesn't identify itself... as in... what it's supposed to teach. Is it a cultural thing? Is it dogmatics? Is it? Is it? Is it? Is it, is it study of religion or religious science or something like that or... or... is it a spiritual thing? So... It's sort of... It's sort of all of these and... and none! It is like... small pieces from each of them, but not a comprehensive one" (H4).

Inadequately trained teachers can lead to students distancing themselves from religion. For example, a child from a divorced family may question the religious teachings they've learned, which can extend to questioning God's existence. H4 explained, "...the student will be disillusioned, not only in his or her parents, but also, but also in religion, and... possibly in God because... God allowed such a thing to happen... the students will think this way... And so... then... then this will obviously affect the students' spiritual life... in a bad way... Where... where you have a... you have a classroom where... where more than 50% of the... the parents of the students are divorced. Then... more than... more than one in two people are divorced then... and... saying that... the... the church says what God has connected, you may not separate... then this has... this has a clash with reality. This... this just doesn't work!" (H4).

Some respondents emphasized that complex religious issues are better addressed by priests rather than teachers, as teachers often lack the necessary expertise to explain these matters adequately. H4 argued that religious education in schools can even harm religiosity by creating a disconnect between students and the church community. "... since... because of this religious education subject, the students are kind of separated from the church community. So, it means it's a... it's a problem" (H4). Additionally, teachers who lack both knowledge and proficiency in educational methods can pose a challenge for CSs. H4 questioned why students should turn to someone who does not teach spiritual or philosophical subjects for answers to such questions. "That's... that's... That's something that's something to do in church and go up to the priest and ask the priest... something like that... But the two are not connected... the things they learn in religious studies and the priests at church are not (connected). Or even the subject, religious subjects that are taught at schools are not connected or... kind of support each other that what is... what is taught in the church! It's connected on the level of... of dogmatics that... but on a spiritual level... who knows!" (H4).

Some respondents, particularly those in administrative positions in CSs, stated that they are open to any questions from students. While parents, fathers, and even some teachers are stricter regarding sensitive topics like homosexuality, students often demonstrate a more open-minded approach. However, when faced with students' questions or behaviors that contradict traditional views, teachers sometimes respond inconsistently. While some are quite liberal, others adopt more rigid attitudes. For instance, H8 shared an example where a teacher asked a student with a piercing to remove it, claiming that it was against religious principles. However, the school administrator, H8, argued that piercings are mentioned in the Bible and, therefore, acceptable. H8 referred to the story of Isaac and Rebecca, where a golden ring was placed on Rebecca's nose as a sign of betrothal. Despite this explanation, it was challenging to persuade the teacher. Interestingly, the student appeared more accepting of differing views than the

teacher, highlighting the generational gap in open-mindedness. H8 said they told the student, "You have to understand that some teachers have problems with it, and you have to live with that." This incident reflects how, in some cases, students' perspectives on sensitive topics can be broader and more accommodating than those of their teachers.

Sharing a similar view, H9 believes that teaching style is outdated and ineffective. Students today are more open-minded and eager to explore deeper questions than teachers may be prepared to address. Students often ask fundamental questions like, "Who am I?" H9 pointed out that this difference in perspective contributes to the tension between teachers and the government, as teachers tend to believe that teaching only what they are experts in, such as chemistry, is sufficient. They do not see the need for broader, more philosophical conversations with students. Moreover, families are often unable to help children navigate these deeper inquiries, further contributing to the disconnect.

Taking Care of Students: Teachers play a key role in shaping the reputation of CSs as inclusive and supportive environments. Families often choose these schools not solely for their religious teachings but for the personalized care and attention students receive. According to H8, teachers in CSs are more empathetic and professional, ensuring students feel supported both academically and personally. "And in pedagogic... we are more... we have more innovations... We have more international programs because we apply for... We are dealing with it, our teachers... are more... more empathetic... with the students. So, we are better schooled, yes, in fact" (H8).

According to H6, teachers provide this personal support in a very professional manner. For example, a history teacher not only teaches the subject as effectively as possible but also addresses other topics, such as religious matters. Families where religiosity may not be of utmost importance still send their children to CSs because they are confident in the school's quality. The quality being referred to here is not so much the quality of instruction but rather

how the students are cared for, which refers to the quality of the teachers. "So it's... it's a task for every class teacher that we have to do our best to take care of the students. I mean, we have to sit down with each of our students once a year and ask how are you... is everything OK in your family... in school... So yeah... So this is a personal... In a way... Personal care... Personal care... personal... personal psychologist" (H6).

However, respondents like H9 and H10 pointed out the significant challenges faced by teachers, particularly the heavy workload that limits their ability to engage deeply with students' personal or ethical questions. Teachers are often preoccupied with organizational tasks and planning, leaving little time for meaningful interactions. This lack of time, coupled with insufficient training, hinders their ability to address students' deep questions about life and faith effectively.

Two Hours of Class is not Enough: One of the primary concerns expressed by those who oppose religious education in CSs is the insufficient amount of time dedicated to religious education. With only two hours allocated for religious studies, the educational approach is seen as inadequate. Religious education cannot be properly addressed within such a limited time frame; it requires more class hours as well as the involvement of the church and the broader community. In many new or converted schools, particularly those that are not well-established, the qualifications of religious education teachers are often insufficient to address young people's complex philosophical and spiritual questions. Such questions, including those related to creation theory, abortion, and the meaning of life, are more appropriately discussed within the church, not at school. Schools are not equipped to handle these questions in the depth they require. Furthermore, CSs and churches are distinct entities, and attending a church school does not necessarily connect students to the church community. As a result, students may not find satisfactory answers to their questions, even though they are taught religious dogmas and rituals in school. As one respondent, H4, stated: "... a high school student with... with... questions

on abortion doesn't reach, doesn't reach the priest. At church, who may have answers or something like that. Because it's... it's totally separate" (H4).

The importance of the family in this context is emphasized. If a student comes from a religious background, they may turn to their family for spiritual guidance. If not, they may begin to question religion altogether. This dynamic underscores how the teacher's approach to religion can influence a student's religiosity. The quality of the school is often seen in terms of teacher competence, which is directly linked to their commitment to their work. Especially old CSs tend to perform better in this regard, as their teachers are generally more dedicated to raising religious children, imparting moral values, and fostering a sense of community.

How to Hire a Teacher/Qualities of Teachers: In Hungary, quality education, regardless of the type of school, is often made possible through the commitment of teachers. This is particularly relevant when considering the criteria for hiring teachers in CSs. According to H10, teachers are selected primarily based on their teaching methods. Additionally, teachers are expected to engage with the religious life of the school and be active participants in it. As H10 explained, "There's no possibility that they don't go to a service or if I send them a devotion and ask them to do this and that... that they would say no... this is not what they can do."

H1 gave an example from his experience while applying for a teaching position in a CS. He was questioned about their faith by the sisters during the hiring process: "...I had to say a few words about my faith, which I found very strange because I think it is difficult to talk about faith... I tried to explain that I... I can't speak about it because I believe it is my privacy... If I have to prove my faith with words, that is very bad" (H1).

Being religious is important but not a must. When the teacher, especially the class teacher, is not religious, the teacher must be open-minded. At least half of the participants mentioned that in such cases, openness is more important. H3 said that some teachers simply

ask students to pray, and while students are praying, the teacher stands there respectfully, listens to the prayer, and then continues with the class.

H3 shared that in his school, about 90% of the teachers are devoted Christians, which creates a cohesive and religiously aligned staff. However, some less religious teachers are accepted, especially in subjects where there is a shortage of qualified educators. H3 mentioned that teachers in subjects like mathematics or information technology, where it is harder to find qualified staff, may not be as religious, but they are still accepted for the sake of the school's survival. Additionally, the teacher shortage in the country, caused by low salaries and heavy workloads, means that only one teacher typically applies for open positions. Consequently, schools often have no choice but to hire them. As H10 noted, "If there are more, of course, one of the things you look at is whether they are an active part of the local church... or whether... you know, in smaller places... people know about each other, whether their families are religious or not."

Many participants highlighted the broader issues in Hungary's education system. These include a shortage of teachers in certain subjects and low salaries for educators. "There are fewer teachers in certain subjects, and teachers are underpaid. Trade unions protested this, claiming that soon there will be no teachers for some subjects."

H3 supported this view, stating that his son, who is studying to become a math teacher, had only four classmates in his program. One of them quit, leaving just three by the end of the year. "It is very... very difficult to find a teacher who teaches math, physics, chemistry, or information technology. Especially information technology. They have the same salaries as Hungarian language and literature teachers. It doesn't matter what subject you teach" (H3).

H5 commented on the widespread criticism of the Hungarian education system, not just of CSs: "...not only for this... not only for this topic. The problems in the educational systems in Hungary are much more... terrible than this. So we can talk about... because there is a

curriculum that the teachers... teachers... living in this territory... And many... many teachers give up being teachers in Hungary" (H5).

Respondents complained about the issue of finding teachers, yet, they also stated that mostly teachers prefer to work in CSs or private schools. The reason is not the salary or atmosphere but to escape the Klebelsberg School Maintaining Authority (KLIK) (In 2011, the Parliament enacted two new laws regarding public and vocational education. In the new structure, all the schools were merged into the Klebelsberg School Maintaining Authority (KLIK).).

KLIK is responsible for distributing funds and making important decisions for state schools. "So all state schools are under this... KLIK... And if you want to escape, you have to become either a church school or teach at a private, foundation-based school that collects fees, etc. Otherwise, you are under this. And usually, teachers don't like that. It makes everything more complicated" (H3).

Religiosity of Teachers: The religiosity of teachers is a crucial factor. If a teacher openly criticizes the religion taught at the school, such as saying Catholicism is bad, it may lead to them being excluded from teaching in the school. H8 stated, "You cannot teach in our school because you are against our religion, and it's... it's normal." According to H10, the goal is to build a strong community—both among students and teachers—and to encourage teachers to strengthen their faith. This shared religious commitment not only enhances the teacher's own spiritual life but also positively impacts their teaching. H10 explained: "My main goal is to build a community... with each other and with God as well... even for the teachers... because the school is not just students. And if the teachers become much more devoted to their faith life, it will influence their classes. So, it's really important to... to have the teachers find their way to God or to support them in their way. In this spiritual way" (H10).

Interestingly, the school's environment can also influence teachers who are not religious. One respondent shared the example of a teacher who had previously received their First Communion at the school and appreciated the sense of community it provided. Another teacher, who identified as an atheist, initially thought he would not stay at the church school for more than two years. However, over time, he found that they enjoyed the school environment, particularly the interactions with students and the positive moral standards in place. Similarly, one teacher noted that the school was quite different from state schools, as students at this school lived by moral standards, which made them more loving, caring, and less resistant to authority. This positive environment made the teacher feel that, at this school, teachers were not viewed as enemies.

6.2.2.4.2. Curriculum.

Religious Courses and Rituals: The religious education practices in CSs can be categorized into two main components: lessons and rituals. In well-established CSs, rituals often exert a stronger influence on religiosity than lessons. These rituals vary depending on the denomination, the school itself, and its material resources. In some institutions, rituals are embedded within the lesson schedule. Interviews reveal that the primary purpose of these rituals is to foster a sense of unity and to integrate students into a church community.

Teacher respondents noted that, by law, a minor deviation—approximately 5%—from the national curriculum is permissible in all schools, including both church and state institutions. Consequently, 95% of the subjects taught in CSs align with those in state schools. The key distinction is the compulsory religious education course in CSs, which is scheduled for two hours per week. In contrast, state school students choose between religious studies and ethics, with the latter being the more popular option. Additionally, CSs incorporate religious practices such as masses, spiritual retreats, and morning prayers, which are absent in state schools.

H1 claimed that two hours of religious education in CSs is too much: "The students in church schools... have to take at least one subject about religion or more... twice a week... for about 2 hours. Yes, and... it... it means a lot. Facts, I mean... about the history of the church and about holidays and... and mass... everything. Yeah, it's very serious" (H1).

The content of these religious education lessons varies by school. H3 explained: "When we teach religious education, we teach all students... the New Testament. So, the two parts... of the Bible. We teach morals, we teach church history, and we teach what we call fundamental theology, which is the idea behind everything" (H3).

Older CSs follow their own religious education materials. Bilingual CSs extend their curriculum to include world religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism. As H3 noted: "So we are doing it because we are bilingual, English bilingual, and you know if you go to Britain, you can see Sikhs because they are very recognizable. ... And then, because we are bilingual, we learn about some cults like the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses. Or as I like, we have more Mormons than Jehovah's Witnesses here in Hungary as well, so they know about the origin and their teachings" (H3).

CSs require student participation in religious rituals, which vary based on denomination, school quality, and location. Some schools organize one- or two-day spiritual retreats, often in rural settings, to prepare students for major Christian holidays. These retreats may involve discussions led by priests. Weekly mass attendance is another integral component of the schedule. As H2 explained: "Every week... we have a mass for... for each grade. So they go to the church and have a mass... which is built into the... the timetable. So this is part of the timetable as well—to go to the church and... so the timetable includes theoretical courses, one subject, and some practical prayers. And there are morning prayers every day before and after the lessons... And... and there's a priest in the schools. If students want to talk to him, have

some questions, or just want to... have him there... then they can go and... discuss their problems with him" (H2).

The responses indicated that students could ask questions about anything and engage in discussions freely in religious education. According to many respondents, no religious topic is off-limits. The discussions include world religions, polytheism, and monotheism; guiding students on how a Christian should engage with other belief systems. "So it is part of the curriculum... If you want to take the school exam, you need to know about it" (H3).

Another significant topic in religious education is the perceived conflict between religion and science. Many students raise questions about contradictions between religious texts and scientific findings. H8 asserted that religion and science address different domains: "...you can discuss... for example, the... the story of creation... why not? ... The Creation story is not a question... why? Why should we discuss the creation theory? It's... it's literature or it's something nice about... but it's not science."

H8 also mentioned that contradictions within church history, the life of Christ, and biblical texts serve as valuable discussion points in religious education. He described an open approach to addressing these topics: "...So, it's interesting to discuss it. Why is it so and what can it mean or how did they write it or when did they write it and why did they write it... and... then... we discussed it very openly. So, we are not fundamentalists. I don't think we are... fundamentalist... radical. We... we have... we have the Bible. We also... have science" (H8).

More than half of the respondents mentioned that many students ask questions claiming there is a contradiction between religion and science. H3 said they already know how to explain such questions. "Well, God created the world. We accept that. And we have to profess that, you know, it is in our creed. But... the how? It's a matter of science" (H3). For H3, the creation stories in the Bible serve different purposes and involve different ways of examining things. Thus, they do not deny scientific results, but science cannot answer all the questions. "That is

what we know, because there are theories, but they cannot get to the final truth. And the final truth is that God created the world. It is according to his will. He made the rules. And it's our task to discover those rules and the world" (H3).

Another frequently discussed theme is the problem of suffering and its implications for belief in God. This question often leads young people to question God's existence. Some well-established CSs address such philosophical and theological issues in special classes known as fundamental theology, which focuses on the ideas behind religion. H3 explained:

"So, arguments for God... arguments against God. We speak about that. We speak about the different ways people seek God. In the history of mankind, starting from cavemen, yes. Going to Egypt, you know... fundamental theology, which is the idea behind everything. Now let's find the beginning of that... We speak about how we have proofs, for example, archaeological or written proofs, that religion has been part of mankind from the very beginning...." (H3).

In old CSs, where the existence of God is especially emphasized, teachers discuss the topic with students in various ways. They develop arguments based on archaeological evidence that proves God's existence. Teachers and administrators stated that, due to the limited class time, they cannot discuss all the arguments, but they do address religious topics when possible and logical in other lessons. For example, discussing the lives of scientists who had arguments for the existence of God in English class.

Religious education in CSs is provided not only by priests but also by trained religion teachers. The structure and objectives of these courses vary depending on the school's denomination. H10 highlighted the differing approaches: "...what we want to achieve and measure... like our goal... Is that they (students) know the things, how to behave at church, know the 10 Commandments and the most important stories and so on? Or to build the relationship so they feel... who God is and what prayer means and... and how the Bible stories

talk to them... to their daily life. And it's interesting that based on the denominations it's... it differs" (H10).

Church-provided textbooks form the foundation of CS curricula. Teachers must adhere to these materials, as deviations require church approval, which is rarely granted due to bureaucratic challenges. As H10 noted: "If not, if we want to have different topics or different stories, we have to ask the church to give us permission. But they don't really like it and it's too much work, so we follow that" (H10)

Teachers lead prayers and attend mass in all CSs. Each school has a class dedicated to holy masses every month. Before the first lesson in the morning, students gather and go either to a chapel at school or, if it's a larger class, to a nearby church to actively participate in the Holy Mass. However, not all CSs follow the same rituals. "Actually... we have a... a very unique system of spiritual guidance. So, every single student above a certain age is 7th grade, 8th grade. However, they can start, can talk privately to either one of the priests or other spiritual leaders. So we have that kind of personal support which is very unique. It is not so in other schools because they don't have enough priest" (H3).

Various rituals were mentioned by respondents, highlighting the role of religious practices in Catholic schools (CSs). Holy masses are conducted at the beginning and end of the academic year, as well as on other special occasions. Some CSs have chapels or large rooms designated for these services. Depending on the availability of priests, weekly holy masses are also held. H3 described the frequency and significance of these gatherings: "There are days when we have three masses because two or three classes attend together. From the fourth grade onward, students have a mass each week. On the first Friday of the month, the entire school gathers for mass because it is a special day for Catholics... It is a devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a Jesuit tradition. On these days, we attend mass, go to confession, and receive Holy Communion" (H3).

Respondents noted that certain rituals and celebrations vary among CSs. Some schools offer early morning masses, though attendance is optional, while others incorporate them into the timetable, making them mandatory. In such cases, students attend mass during the first lesson of the day. The first Friday of each month is a significant occasion, with the whole school participating in a collective mass.

In older CSs, students receive their First Communion at school, typically in third grade, after attending church as a class. This includes their first confession and communion. Preparation for Confirmation is also provided, usually starting in the eighth grade, though it may be postponed until later. One respondent explained that Confirmation is a personal decision, particularly relevant for sacraments like marriage, as it signifies an individual's conscious commitment to Christianity. Since most children are baptized as infants, Confirmation allows them to affirm their faith independently. H3 elaborated on its significance: "Confirmation is a form of witnessing the gospel, similar to missionary work, though not necessarily in distant countries. In some schools, where most students are Christian, this is easier, but in others, expressing and defending one's faith can be more challenging" (H3).

Apart from holy masses, CSs organize retreats, providing spiritual experiences beyond regular lessons. For younger students, retreats involve games and songs, while older students participate in one- or two-day retreats twice a year. These often include pilgrimages, such as those incorporating the Stations of the Cross, sometimes involving mountain climbing. H3 described these experiences: "...you know it is very good when... when you are in the... in the forest or... or in the mountains, in the woods we have a silent period... So... so... you get some kind of biblical quote or some idea to... to think about. And then we ask them (students) to be silent, not to talk. And they say... it can be so good because otherwise the world is very noisy. And then they walk in nature, and they think about those things, they meditate on them, and

then they get together for these stations of the cross, reminding them what Jesus did for us" (H3).

Beyond religious education (RE) classes, additional activities enhance spiritual engagement. H4 mentioned two weekend trips per year, similar to camping programs, allowing students to pray, reflect, and discuss religious topics. These retreats, often led by class teachers, focus on themes like relationships with oneself, classmates, and God. H6 explained: "This year, I invited a psychologist to discuss relationships... So... relationships with ourselves, with classmates, and with God. The students discussed these topics" (H6). Schools also provide opportunities for students to be baptized outside of regular lessons, with afternoon preparation sessions led by priests.

Extracurricular activities are often perceived as more impactful than formal RE classes. Rituals and informal gatherings foster deeper engagement, allowing for open discussions. H4 emphasized that these programs create a more communicative and supportive environment than traditional classroom settings: "We have a special lesson that focuses on communication, self-reflection, and interaction. It follows a training-style approach rather than a conventional lesson structure, making it more engaging" (H4). Similarly, H6 highlighted five annual self-reflection sessions, providing students with the opportunity to confess, ask questions, and discuss personal growth topics: "Last week, our theme was being present for one another. Students reflected on how they could be more attentive to their classmates and parents" (H6).

Participation in religious services and ceremonies is compulsory for all students. There are various activities and rituals, some of which respondents initially forgot to mention but later recalled. Most considered these rituals as tools to bring students closer to God. Opinions about the frequency of religious classes and rituals vary. While some respondents found the activities manageable, others admitted they could occasionally feel overwhelming. One respondent

acknowledged that while some activities might seem excessive, most are enjoyable and foster a sense of community within the church.

"We have so-called retreat days. This means a project day, a spiritual project day. On these days, there are no classes. For example, during the last retreat, held at Easter, the topic was the holy three days—when Jesus was killed, buried, and resurrected. We invited a Christian group to assist. The children participated in activities like crafts, discussions on specific topics, and games, all of which had a spiritual or biblical theme. The day started and ended with devotions. We have this activity at least once a year, sometimes twice," explained H10.

Some religious activities occur at the school, while others are held in churches or other locations. Special holiday services, such as Easter, Christmas, or Reformation Day, are celebrated in churches, resembling Sunday worship with unique songs. H10 noted that more people participate in these holiday services compared to regular Sunday worship. During these events, school priests encourage both students and teachers to take active roles.

CSs also organize whole-school masses multiple times a year. H6 noted: "We have seven whole-school masses annually. Everyone arrives at 7:30 AM, participates in the mass, and then lessons start later" (H6). Additionally, Monday morning prayers and 15-minute reflection sessions before the first lesson provide students with space to share their thoughts and feelings.

RE activities are inclusive, allowing participation from students of diverse religious backgrounds, including those who are not religious. H7 explained: "...everybody can participate... and so you don't have to be very religious if you participate" (H7).

For respondents working in CSs, these schools offer a moral compass for children, addressing the challenges of modern, individualized society. H9 pointed out that knowledge alone is insufficient in a world where issues like drug use threaten young lives. While knowledge is important, he emphasized that it is not enough on its own; students need guidance.

He argued that CSs provide this guidance and serve as role models with better teachers and education. State schools, he claimed, focus narrowly on subjects like science, math, and chemistry, neglecting the spiritual side of human development. He added that even if students initially reject religious teachings, they may come to appreciate them later in life, particularly when raising their own children. "Students may discover the importance of what was taught to them and realize it wasn't nonsense after all," H9 said.

School Atmosphere: CSs provide students with a specific physical environment filled with religious markers, such as crucifixes or religious images, which are present throughout the school day. These markers can be seen everywhere, including hallways and classrooms. In Catholic CSs, crucifixes typically depict the body of Christ, whereas Protestant CSs often use a plain cross. Additionally, classrooms might display images of the Pope, the Virgin Mary, and patron saints. H3 emphasized: "What I think makes us a Catholic school is the atmosphere... Being religious schools... you will find some markers which reflect your relationship with God" (H3).

Some CSs have dormitories where students participate in additional religious rituals. H6 shared that dormitory students have an evening prayer session followed by group discussions on the same topics addressed in the morning.

H7 noted that religious education is not confined to classes but permeates daily life: "We have different religious programs as well, but... Religion is also part of our... our life" (H7). He highlighted that discussions after lectures or programs serve as informal extensions of religious education. In small groups, students discuss topics related to religious life, family, education, or other issues, fostering personal connections and providing social and mental education. "It's not limited to two hours of religious education; it's integrated into life. These activities I mentioned—one or two days annually—are part of this integration" (H7).

Adjustments in Religious Practices: Respondents also discussed how CSs have adapted their rituals to align with the expectations of new generations. H9 reflected on his changing views, acknowledging that decades ago, he opposed students having piercings or dyed hair. Today, however, he believes schools should focus on addressing students' internal struggles rather than outward appearances.

Curriculum adjustments over time have prompted mixed feelings. H7 lamented the decline in theological and music education compared to his own school days but noted that these changes reflect evolving family and student priorities. Subjects like math are now emphasized over arts or sports because they are seen as more directly linked to job prospects.

Respondents expressed concerns about the broader direction of education, stating that it is not improving but rather changing in a negative way. H7 attributed this shift to changing values among students and families. Arts and sports are no longer considered as important as subjects like mathematics, which are directly tied to career success. As a result, transmitting fundamental values has become more challenging. However, H7 believes that these values are still crucial for professional success in a different way. In a world where many excel in math and science, what differentiates individuals are "soft values," such as artistic expression and manual skills—abilities beyond technical knowledge.

CSs have also increased opportunities for student participation in RE classes. Over the past decade, students have gained more freedom to ask questions about their beliefs and feelings, fostering open conversations on topics like the existence of God and the problem of suffering. "They ask everything, and this is good because it encourages dialogue and provides answers," said H7.

In response to complaints about traditional ceremonies feeling overwhelming, schools have introduced modern activities to better suit contemporary students and families. However, opinions remain divided. H6 described the challenge of balancing differing expectations: "And

it's... it's very interesting to see that nowadays we have two ways. One of them is complaining that it's too much and the other way is... complaining that it's not enough... So, it's really hard to, you know, satisfy all the needs. Yeah, maybe impossible... Society is going to different sides" (H6).

Differences between Church Schools and State Schools: CSs and state schools (SSs) are quite different in many respects. Some respondents highlighted these differences through comparative remarks. H1 said that CSs are more sensitive to every person, not the whole class.

The physical atmosphere of both types of schools is also different. CSs are more attentive to aesthetics. Their schools are decorated beautifully, clean, and well-organized. "So, it... it was a pharmacy. And now... I'm working in an old factory. :)))" (H1). The decorations reflect the fact that these are CSs. Crucifixes are present everywhere—in the teachers' room and in all classrooms. State schools definitely do not have them. H3 stated that it is not forbidden for SSs, "but why would they if they don't believe in it? We believe in Jesus' sacrifice. That's why we put the... the crucifix on the wall" (H3).

The atmosphere in CSs fosters much more respect for teachers. In other schools, teachers have to prove themselves to gain respect, but this is unnecessary in CSs. Students inherently respect their teachers. "And whenever I go in... into a new classroom, I don't have to convince them that I am... a person to be valued and accepted... and respected. So, they have.... different attitude to people I think, because they... they have that kind of teaching from... from a young age that you should love your neighbor" (H3).

Regarding the quality of education, some respondents agreed that church-owned schools can now provide a higher level of education than state schools. There is a significant difference between church and state schools.

CSs are particularly important for children from religious families. This is because these children, especially those who are devout, may face some form of discrimination if they attend

SSs. For this reason, H3 likened CSs to a cocoon. "...this school is like a cocoon. So, so... they are protected. It's the kind of community where they... they are at home." This sense of feeling at home is so strong that when these children enter the secular world after graduation, they suffer greatly because the highly secular environment does not respect their values.

Although most respondents claimed that CSs outperform SSs in many ways, some said they do not see much difference between the two. SSs are not in such bad shape, and the gap between them is not that wide. However, financially, most CSs are better off.

If CSs are better in many aspects than SSs, the question arises whether it is possible to implement the teaching model of CSs in state schools instead of turning all state schools into CSs. H9 mentioned research about the quality of teachers in state schools, showing that many excellent teachers work there. They aim to expand the CS model of teaching, but H9 emphasized that teaching or education is a team effort. A single teacher or a few teachers in a school cannot bring about significant change, as it is too challenging for a lone teacher to perform well. Nevertheless, the non-religious segment of society is also important, and state schools must reach the same quality as CSs. When state schools achieve that level, "in my opinion, church-run schools... will not expand for the have not for that expansion..." (H9).

Impact of CSs: Respondents, particularly those affiliated with a CS, reflected on the complexities of assessing the influence of CSs on students' faith and spirituality. They noted that while some students might not regularly attend church or formally engage in religious practices after graduation, the impact of the school's teachings often remains significant in their lives.

Reflecting on their role, H10 expressed a sense of accomplishment in helping students and teachers gain even a basic understanding of their faith. He referenced a biblical concept, emphasizing that any exposure to God's teachings leaves an impression, even if the impact isn't immediately measurable. H10 shared examples of how faith manifests within the school

community, such as teachers quoting biblical values like forgiveness or students growing more receptive to terms like devotion and prayer. Through pastoral conversations and daily interactions, he observed subtle but meaningful signs of spiritual growth among students and staff.

Three respondents mentioned that their schools conducted surveys to assess their impact on students. These surveys asked students about the school's success in fostering religious faith and personal development. The results were generally positive. H3 shared some statistics: "The question was... the school has a goal, which means educating a whole person... In terms of religion, in terms of academics, in terms of personal development... What percentage do you think that the school was successful in her goals... and... they say 70-80%, it is successful... And that is more than half... And... 30%, they say... that the school was not very successful..." (H3).

They observed that personal relationships with God, connections with others, and the network fostered by CSs frequently become stable and enduring influences. This bond often leads individuals to seek help or return to their faith during challenging times in life.

As an example of the inadequacy of religious studies teachers in newly established or converted CSs, it was noted that they do not establish personal connections with students. For instance, during the lockdown period caused by COVID-19, when education transitioned entirely online, there was a lack of spiritual guidance from religious studies teachers. During this challenging time, no effort was made to address students' emotional or spiritual struggles. Questions like how God could allow a pandemic went unanswered, leaving a void in the spiritual dialogue that could have supported students.

Respondents generally believed that the quality and identity of religious instruction in traditional schools, often supported by monastic orders, provided a richer and more authentic experience than what was typically available in state schools with less specialized teachers.

Some respondents pointed out that in many newly converted CSs, religious education was sometimes conducted by non-specialized teachers, even gym teachers, simply because they had more open slots in their schedules.

Reflecting on their own childhood, H4 recalled having vibrant communities both at school and church, with opportunities for shared activities and trips. They contrasted this with the current situation: "When our children started growing... growing into this... I tried finding such communities in Budapest, and... and they don't really exist now. So a good... a good church community which... which does things together... We... we didn't really find it" (H4).

Respondents also discussed the complexities of teaching religion, emphasizing that it differs significantly from subjects like math, where outcomes are more predictable. They explained that for some students, particularly those with no prior connection to God or religion, the concept of a relationship with God can be entirely new and surprising. However, the limited time frame of four years, starting at ages 13 or 14, poses challenges in fostering a deep and lasting religious understanding.

Two respondents approached the topic from different angles and argued that mandatory religious or ethics courses negatively impact students' religiosity in both state and CSs. They believed that making religious studies compulsory diminished church-organized religious education and community activities, as children felt no need to engage with religion outside school. Students developed an understanding that this subject pertained only to their academic life and not real life. Thus, religion became just another subject, disconnected from their everyday experiences.

H10 highlighted the challenges and unintended consequences of this policy, criticizing the government's decision to make religious education mandatory. This shift created logistical issues, including a lack of teachers, resources, and classroom space, sparking debates about whether mandating religious education is beneficial.

Some respondents noted that a significant challenge in religious education is having only two hours per week to teach students from diverse backgrounds. H6 explained that some students are deeply religious and attend Holy Mass regularly, while others are uncertain about God's existence. With just two hours allocated weekly, addressing such varied levels of knowledge and belief is an arduous task.

Referring to this issue, H7 emphasized the importance of inclusive RE programs and activities. These initiatives are designed to allow participation by students of all religious backgrounds, including those who are not religious. They aim to foster a sense of community and engagement, ensuring all students feel welcome regardless of their religiosity. "So, these programs are... have an inclusive character in, that means everybody can participate in it, and so you don't have to be very religious if you participate... there are... Some, there may be some... lessons as well" (H7).

A problem highlighted about CSs by some respondents was the lack of religious freedom for children enrolled there. They expressed concerns that as these students grow and begin to explore different beliefs, they may feel trapped in an environment that enforces religious practices and values. "They are forced to... to comply with religious values. And if they don't want to, if they want to change schools... that's well, not that easy if you... distancing yourself from your religion. And I don't say becoming atheist or something... Just distancing yourself from this religion at the same time also means that you have to... that you are going to be an outsider at school and outsider from your peer group, because that's all mixed up. I'm... I don't think that this is... a very child-friendly type of educational system" (H11).

H11 argued that this rigid system does not support a child's personal development or exploration of faith. He contrasted it with secular schools, where students could freely navigate their religious or non-religious identities without school life intertwining deeply with religious

expectations. From this perspective, H11 suggested that RSs might not always be the best option for children, even those from religious families.

H5 reflected that there is no direct link between attending a church school and personal religious practice. While this connection might have existed 40–50 years ago, the current landscape is different. H9 added that even if religiosity increases, it will not be due to CSs or churches but rather to individuals' personal understanding of religion.

Religious courses have an influence, though not consistently across all CSs. The effect is particularly evident in older, more established institutions. This does not imply that every religious school has the same level of impact; rather, the better-organized ones demonstrate significant effects, while others operate more like standard secular schools.

H10 reflected on how social and cultural environments shape students' perspectives, particularly in smaller towns or cities. They noted that in such areas, with populations as small as 15,000 people, children grow up in homogeneous communities influenced by both the local population and governmental policies. As a result, ethical and political viewpoints tend to be more uniform. Conversely, larger cities like Budapest foster greater diversity in perspectives due to the influence of varied cultural and social factors. "So within one city, I don't think that you can get this really wide difference... It's more between, as I think, if you look at the map, which party won the election where, you can kinda guess what you know, what their thinking is about... about, for example, ethical things" (H10). They highlighted that this uniformity of thought is more prevalent in smaller communities, while broader differences emerge in urban areas, often reflecting political divides visible on electoral maps.

H11 pointed out that the influence of these systems on students' religiosity remains uncertain and will only become clear with time. H5 echoed this sentiment, stating: "And the question in the future in Hungary... if they... if there's a child became... become really

religious members of the church. But we don't know it. It's too soon... It's too soon. I think in 30 years we will see it. But now we can't. We can't say it" (H5).

H11 addressed the question of whether CSs make students more religious, noting that it is still too early to draw long-term conclusions. The current church-heavy school system has been in place for less than a decade, and external factors such as personal life circumstances and societal security also play crucial roles in shaping religiosity. They suggested that individuals living in secure social systems with guaranteed basic needs might be less inclined toward religiosity, as they would not need to rely on religious institutions for support. On the other hand, in less secure environments, people may turn to religion for both practical assistance and emotional solace.

"I think the question... whether these... school kids will become very religious or less religious also depends on... on factors like that, how... how... is the life they are going to live? Do they feel secure or do they feel insecure? If you have a social system, if you have Social Security in a European sense... then people will... probably be a bit less religious. If Social Security is something you have to deserve by being nice to the church who provides for shelter... Then people will obviously be more religious" (H11).

Religious education (RE) could be more effective in transmitting religious values if it did not solely focus on imparting knowledge. Some respondents criticized the traditional method of teaching, which primarily emphasized the transmission of information. However, instilling values requires a different approach—one that prioritizes dialogue with students rather than mere preaching. In contemporary education, RE should adopt a more synodal approach. Acknowledging this need, especially older CSs are undergoing a transformation to align with modern educational expectations.

The way of teaching must change in order to keep students in CSs. H8 has been teaching at a CS for more than two decades and he said when he started to teach every year the number

of students were declining. Not all the students were interested in religion and they were not very cooperative in joining rituals. Teaching religious students was straightforward, but engaging those without a prior interest in religion proved challenging. Consequently, there is a need to offer something more substantial. H8 referred to this as establishing a "real religious community." He emphasized that the approach to teaching must change to foster such an environment.

A shift from traditional lecture-based methods to more interactive and collaborative teaching styles is essential. H8 remarked that his university training for teaching was ineffective, as the prescribed methods did not work in practice. Current teacher training is ineffective as it makes educators often feel constrained by the need to impart specific religious knowledge. This can limit their ability to adopt new pedagogies. As a director, H8 asserted that pedagogical reform should apply to all subjects, not just RE. Cooperative learning techniques should also be integrated into religious education. Over time, there have been improvements, with a shift from passive lectures to interactive discussions. However, he stressed that he still needed more energy to introduce new methodologies in RE classes to sustain student interest and enhance engagement.

Reflecting on past experiences, H8 recalled his own RE classes, which were taught by priests: "These two days... A priest came... And they had lectures and silence.... Lectures silence... lectures silence.... And I know myself... And... was very... Identified a piece and what they say, what they what they said.... And it was a great tension in... in myself.... That the students... How.... That they... that they are brave. And... and... So that that shouldn't be a problem with the amount and in this lectures, because it was not interesting at all... Nowadays in this, this type of activity, we are working with the students, we all the teachers are involved and and we discussed with them open topics. So that's much, much better.." (H8).

Overall, there is a strong consensus among respondents advocating for reforms to make RE more engaging and effective for students.

H7 compared the CSs of today with those from 20 years ago. In the past, CSs were fewer in number, and students who attended were genuinely interested in learning about religion, making them more religious overall. Consequently, the level of religious knowledge was higher than it is now. He explained: "We... in religious lessons, what we have had learned was more more theoretical... more more theology... So... What nowadays they can learn in the lessons is something very little... in the sense of theology... So it's very different now. It's more... involving the students in religious life, and not so much... religion as a... as a science... it's kind of practical side of religion... And the values that you can apply in your life something like that... Regarding the... book... bookish knowledge... it's in... it's in change as well. It's changing what is possible, what is not... The pedagogy itself is very different... it was very different that time and now" (H7).

As families prioritize university admissions and career prospects, their expectations from CSs have shifted. To remain relevant, CSs must adjust their teaching methods. Students may be less inclined to engage in theology, instead opting to focus on science, as theology does not hold immediate practical significance for them. "I think that's... that's not the most important thing to... to have this knowledge... nowadays... young people are changing and need to adjust to them" (H7).

H7 emphasized the importance of pedagogy: "So it's all about how to teach... Not only what you teach..." (H7).

Over the past decade, religious education has shifted in response to evolving expectations from families and students. Previously, teaching primarily focused on conveying facts and theological knowledge. Today, the approach is more interactive, incorporating students' feelings and personal experiences with religion. Teachers now listen to students'

perspectives rather than merely delivering information. While the content remains largely unchanged, teaching methods have become more engaging and student-centered. "...the teacher is just towards the basic things and... the fact that they should learn just large information... just knowledge... and... and now they... really count that... their feelings... how they feel about religion, what they think... 10 years ago... our teacher's mouth was in the center, so to give information and now our (teachers) ears become more important to hear what they are saying and yeah, this is the first thing that you should do... So, it's more interactive... we are on our way to find new ways how to hear what students have in their soul, in their mind. So, what we teach didn't really change, but how we would like to do it changed a lot... so... so... the aim also did not change. Religious education has the same goals... " (H7).

Some respondents highlighted the role of the church in fostering religious engagement through innovative educational resources. Middle school textbooks include stories, real-life scenarios, situational games, and thought-provoking questions to encourage critical thinking. The goal is not only to teach biblical content but also to develop Christian reasoning skills that help students navigate complex moral and ethical issues. By fostering reflection and adaptability, the church seeks to equip students with a faith that is both intellectually and practically grounded.

Evaluating the success of RE in strengthening students' faith remains a challenge. Respondents acknowledged that measuring spiritual growth is inherently subjective. However, they believe that schools have improved in this regard compared to the past. Previously, rigid and authoritarian approaches often provoked resistance, with some students vowing never to return to church after leaving school. "...I mean... some years ago when we had... had these... really rigid rules... then sometimes it backfired. So, when students left here... they said that I will never ever go to the church again" (H6).

In response, CSs have adapted their approach to religious education, making it more moderate and student-friendly. This transition has reduced resistance and fostered a more positive engagement with faith. The shift toward a balanced and inclusive pedagogy suggests that CSs are evolving to better serve students' needs while maintaining their religious mission.

In sum, teachers' quality and competence were strongly correlated with the impact of the school on religiosity. Respondents highlighted the significant role of teachers in shaping religious engagement, pointing to the time and effort dedicated to extracurricular activities and rituals beyond the standard two hours of religious education weekly. H1 noted the importance of having capable class teachers who actively involve students in rituals, such as Holy Mass, ensuring broader participation. Without such efforts, religious education tends to have limited influence.

Church Schools and Nationalism: The impact of CSs extends to nationalism, intertwining it with religiosity by presenting Christianity as central to Hungarian identity, which implicitly excludes those outside this framework. Respondents criticized CSs for their excessive focus on the past, claiming it fosters a stagnant, backward-looking mentality. They argued that revisiting pre-Communist or Trianon-era sentiments is unproductive, advocating instead for shaping a forward-thinking society, as the future is changeable while the past is not.

The ideology imparted in CSs pervades the school environment, including meticulously curated decorations that reinforce identity-building. This approach promotes religious and nationalist ideals as essential to personal and national identity, normalizing the portrayal of historical events like Trianon as monumental tragedies. Respondents noted how young students internalize these narratives, sometimes prioritizing collective sorrow over personal feelings. This creates a perception that true Hungarian identity is tied to being both religious and nationalist. For some, this duality leads to the belief that Christianity is Hungary's "national religion," and those outside it are perceived as less Hungarian (H1). "Not pure religiosity that

church schools are teaching, but teaching nationalism also. There is this religion... is our nations religion... hand in hand... Kind of justifying the one with other... Build on each others bricks... I'm... I'm religious and nationalist... I'm more nationalist... I'm more religious. So if you do not have one, you cannot... and this is how my identity is built. ... It's kind of Christianity is a national religion... if you are not a Christian, you are not Hungarian" (H1).

Historically, Hungary has promoted a national Christian identity to reinforce nationalism. However, respondents highlighted that this approach is problematic in a diverse society where minorities constitute about 10% of the population. They argued that promoting a homogeneous "white Christian Hungarian" identity is both misleading and ineffective.

The new curriculum reflects this ideology by prioritizing Hungarian literature over foreign works and elevating conservative nationalist authors while excluding modernist and immigrant writers. This shift contradicts the pacifist foundations of Christianity, as one respondent observed, highlighting the curriculum's preference for a militant narrative over inclusivity. "Christianity is basically a pacifist religion... avoiding pacifist authors is a strange construction" (H4).

Respondents also expressed concern about the conflation of political allegiance with religious identity. Many perceive support for Fidesz as synonymous with being Christian, while opposition is often equated with liberal, Western, or even non-Christian values. This binary framework, perpetuated by government rhetoric, fosters a divisive "common enemy" narrative targeting groups such as migrants, Western liberals, and figures like George Soros. However, respondents emphasized that Christians exist across the political spectrum, challenging the notion that religiosity aligns exclusively with government ideology: "...there are Christian people on the opposition side as well. But people don't look at that way. I mean this common enemy view... Is... one of the tools of the government, which I don't think that it's Christian.

It's it might be the migrants, it can be the George Soros, it can be the Western, it can be the Liberals, Communists" (H10).

Respondents highlighted that being a good Hungarian does not necessarily mean being Catholic, acknowledging the presence of Protestants and other denominations within Hungary. H3 shared a personal perspective, noting that his father was Protestant. He expressed admiration for the dynamic discussions between Catholic and Protestant students, where debates often arise, and students sometimes reconsider their views after exploring the Bible and church history together.

They emphasized that the church's mission is universal and inclusive, extending beyond national or cultural boundaries. The term "Catholic," derived from the Greek word for "universal," underscores this inclusivity, signifying that the church is meant for everyone, regardless of nationality, and has endured for nearly 2,000 years.

Respondents questioned the notion of nationalism within CSs, distancing themselves from any nationalist agenda. They argued that the church's universal teachings are incompatible with nationalist ideologies. "So it is that kind of universality that we accept. Everyone is... in there... in church teaching. I... I don't know which church schools are... nationalists... I don't know" (H3). This perspective reflects an effort to preserve the church's identity as a global and inclusive institution, resisting alignment with narrow, nationalistic frameworks.

6.2.2.5. Religious Reasons.

One of the factors that lead CS students to question religion, and sometimes distance themselves from it, is categorized under religious reasons. While some respondents addressed this issue from different perspectives, others either did not acknowledge its existence or did not mention it at all. Among those who discussed the topic, some indicated that the way religion is presented in schools and society negatively affects young people. Others claimed that religion

itself, certain biblical commandments, or religious stories contribute to the tendency to move away from faith. The analysis of the interviews revealed over ten codes:

- Archaic religious interpretations / teachings
- Religion based on superstitions
- Practices carried out in the name of religion
- Those who speak in the name of religion
- Religion itself
- Conflicts between religious rules and modern life
- Distrust in institutional religious authority
- Reacting religious practices
- Excessive exposure to religion
- Reconciling family values with religious teachings

These religion-related factors were categorized into two main headings: Religion itself and exposure to religion.

6.2.2.5.1. Religion Itself.

A few respondents said that religion itself was the first and often the only factor in atheism-deism tendencies. Among these respondents were both CS-affiliated and non-CS individuals, who were not opposed to CSs. They did not mention the need for different interpretations of the Bible. However, they argued that religious stories and rules no longer appeal to today's youth. According to these respondents, the more people learn about God and religion, the more atheistic they become.

While philosophical questions might play a role, H2 suggests that these are less common. For instance, students may struggle to reconcile biblical stories, like the creation narrative, with scientific theories such as evolution. In these cases, they seek explanations within a religious framework. However, when the answers they receive fail to satisfy their

questions, they may begin to distance themselves from religion. Typically, students try to find answers first and only later consider leaving if they remain dissatisfied.

Another important factor is the conflict between a student's family structure and CS teachings. For instance, some students come from families that do not adhere to Christian morals but still function well. These students love their families and find it challenging to reconcile their affection for them with the church's teachings that label certain actions of their loved ones as sinful. They struggle to differentiate between accepting a person as a sinner and condoning the sin itself. This moral conflict can make it hard for them to see the value in following Christian teachings. Furthermore, they sometimes feel forced to choose between family and religious rules, often choosing family.

Moreover, three respondents mentioned that Christian teachings appear strict and counter to modern societal norms. Some students are unwilling to follow these morals. Christian moral rules, such as those related to marriage, gender relationships, and divorce, are particularly challenging for some students. For example, church teachings prohibit living together before marriage or remarrying after divorce if one wishes to receive communion. These strict rules often clash with the realities of students' lives, making it difficult for them to fully embrace the faith.

Religious commandments and prohibitions create dilemmas, particularly when they conflict with modern societal norms or personal experiences. Common areas of contention include divorce, birth control, and premarital relationships. These issues become even more complicated when they involve students' families or teachers. For instance, when a teacher divorces, Catholic schools rarely intervene in a manner consistent with religious doctrine, even though they are legally permitted to impose specific rules on teachers' personal lives. Divorce is now largely regarded as a private matter, despite contradicting Catholic beliefs. As one respondent (H8) expressed: "I don't know if I could say for somebody who... who... divorced

or... or separated... I could say we don't want to have you anymore because it's against the Catholic religion... but we don't say it... I don't know if... if I could..."

Another controversial topic is in vitro fertilization (IVF), which the Catholic Church opposes. However, some teachers in CSs have children through IVF. Some respondents recalled discussing such issues with students, referencing a letter from the Hungarian Bishops' Conference about family values. While students engaged in discussions about the letter, many struggled to understand why the church disapproves of IVF.

6.2.2.5.2. Exposure to Religion.

When religious teachings seem outdated or rigid, students' detailed exposure to them in a school setting can foster resistance. Respondents who highlighted this were not opposed to CSs, but they acknowledged that exposure to religious teachings can trigger atheistic or deistic tendencies.

They questioned whether attending RSs genuinely makes young people more religious, suggesting it might even have the opposite effect. Sometimes students resist religious practices during their school years, although this resistance may diminish over time. H11 argued that "religious" could be defined in various ways and highlighted that conforming to social norms—like attending church—does not necessarily indicate personal faith.

This paradoxical impact of religious education was discussed by a few respondents, suggesting that excessive knowledge about religion can sometimes diminish students' religiosity. H11 referenced Mark Twain's quote, "If you want to make an atheist, make him read the Bible," to illustrate how deep exposure to religious teachings might provoke doubt rather than faith. Although not from CSs, H11 noted that after religious education became mandatory in state schools in 2013, some parents were surprised by their children's strong reactions, such as claiming non-churchgoers were destined for hell. This often led parents to reconsider their decisions, realizing they were unaware of the religious education content. "So

yes, I think again, these people who... who, uh, realize the less nice things that are taught by religion will be rather driven away from religion. And... and become... you know, believers in their own way so they will retain a belief in God. But... but distance themselves from churches... and I get that this type of belief in... there are some high... higher power, but that's it" (H11).

H11 further noted that increased knowledge about religion, especially its complexities and differences among Christian denominations, can lead to skepticism. The conflicting claims of being the sole bearer of absolute truth by various denominations may cause students to question these assertions and distance themselves from institutionalized religion. Instead, many retain a personal belief in a higher power but reject organized religious systems. "So if they know about the difference and... and about the differences, then this also questions this claim of religion, that they are in possession of some absolute truth, I think. So yes, knowledge is dangerous. Yes, who all to all, to all authoritarian systems" (H11).

H6 also reflected on the potential drawbacks of excessive exposure to religion, particularly for younger generations immersed in the internet and modern distractions. They argued that overwhelming students with religious teachings can lead to rejection rather than engagement. "...sometimes... I think... being exposed to religion too much can have side effects... when I was a high school student... and religious schools back then... they were not effective at all, even keeping a good level of religiousness as well. So, they were not effective... Maybe just exposing... so exposed... too much... exposed... too much exposition, then, especially in this age like this new generation... So much internet and everything... than... they reject. They don't want to practice too much. I think that's the case..." (H6).

H10 noted that forcing religious education often led to resistance among students and families, even within CSs. "We sometimes face unpleasant conversations with parents... because of religious education... and how they take part in devotions... or... church services,

even if they picked our school. So, it must have a backside as well... that some people got religious poison, I know. If too much it, they didn't want it, they have to write tests and they are forced to get up early half an hour earlier because of the devotions. So. Yeah... Forced religious education might have a negative impact. ... Even in... even in... in the church schools... Not too much religious talk, too much religious topics and classes. ... And some parents say... you, you know that... I didn't think that you, you take it so seriously, for example, or... or I didn't know that... all right, tests. It's... every time that we have a new generation or a new class, I'm invited to talk about the religious life of the school. And I always say that it's like a normal class. You will have tests and textbooks and official educated teachers and so on. But there are always people who say. Look at... religion and grades and I said, you know I cannot give grades how they pray or how intimate their life is with God, but I can give grades... whether they know the 10 Commandments or... they know the stories and it is requested by the government. So... it's... it's compulsory for us, teachers and pastors, to follow the... the normal class rhythm and so on" (H10).

Citing past experiences with ineffective RSs, H6 stressed the need to adapt teaching methods to make religious education more meaningful and relevant. They also cautioned against increasing the number of RSs without ensuring a corresponding improvement in quality, as this could lead to negative outcomes. "Yeah... then... you have to modify... teaching system where there's a religious part... because it's too much. ... And... it maybe, it might be... it might not be a good idea... to increase the number of religious schools if you don't increase the quality. And like... if you don't have schools that are able to... modify the teaching... so, it will have some negative impacts" (H6).

While more than half of respondents did not mention excessive exposure to religion as a reason for atheism or deism, some highlighted positive effects. H1 observed that some

students with minimal prior exposure to religion became religious after attending CSs, influenced by community life, while others from strict religious families lost their faith.

H3 claimed that exposure to religion in CSs positively impacts students' religiosity, though not universally. "I have seen students who... Their mission is to distribute Bibles and they go to hotels for example... And you know, in a lot of hotels you can find the Bible in the night stand and it is donated by them because that is... what they do. And they came here and they donated to us... Bibles. Then... they refused to be religious anymore..." (H3).

One respondent noted the tension between science and religion, which is often a reason for atheism or deism, and suggested that education increases the likelihood of such beliefs. H9 argued that RSs counter the negative impact of education on religiosity by incorporating RE into their curriculum. "Maybe religious schools were founded... as a kind of solution for this... We give education, but we also teach religion... so that is why we are kind of... balancing the negative effects of education on religiosity" (H9).

The long-term impact of the religious education system implemented over the past decade was also questioned. H11 shared an anecdote about an acquaintance who grew up devoutly Catholic but experienced a shift in religious values after a transformative life event in their thirties. "I'm not sure about the long-term effect of this system. A very devout person at 20 might not be at 40. Life happens." (H11)

6.2.2.6. Church Schools and Segregation.

Unlike public schools, CSs have the autonomy to determine their own student admission criteria, granting them the discretion to accept or reject applicants. The criteria for student admission vary, including factors such as religiosity, family background, and academic success—sometimes involving one, all, or a combination of these elements. While this autonomy allows CSs to maintain specific educational and religious standards, it also raises

significant concerns about segregation and elitism. Many respondents, including those affiliated with CSs, highlighted these issues when discussing admission practices.

Almost ten main codes appeared while analysing:

- Selecting criterias
- Socio-economic and ethnic segregation
- Challenges of integration in diverse communities
- Converting church-run schools
- Conversion and educational quality
- Financial constraints in school conversions
- Political pressures in education
- Impact of Converted Church Schools
- Long-Term Outcomes and Generational Impact

This section is divided into five: Accepting criteria, segregation, converting schools, converting and segregation, and impact of converted CSs.

6.2.2.6.1. Acceptance Criteria.

Religious Affiliation: The primary criterion for admission to CSs, as with other institutions, is the general university entrance examination. Following this, each school independently decides whether to conduct an oral exam. CSs often use oral exams to assess applicants' compatibility with school rules. Some schools also require additional tasks, such as written assignments or performances. For instance, H2's school conducts an oral exam after the written test, with applicants needing to achieve a minimum score to qualify for the oral exam. Subsequently, the school determines the number of students to admit. In some cases, schools meet with students and their parents to evaluate their motivation. H6 noted that they ask students to read a short text aloud to assess comprehension. For bilingual programs, language proficiency in a foreign language is required.

Although academic success is important, many respondents emphasized that alignment with religious values is a more critical factor. For certain CSs, a student's religiosity holds significant weight. As H4 stated, "Officially... yes... officially the condition for accepting students is... high appraisal of Christian values and morals in the family."

To gauge applicants' adherence to Christian values, schools often conduct interviews. H4 explained that these interviews may be conducted by priests or teachers, with candidates sometimes required to provide recommendation letters from priests: "They have a recommendation from a... from a priest saying, saying yes, these are good Christians. ... the school... school teachers are doing the interviews and the priest has to write a letter of recommendation. ... Priest of... the Church of that family goes..." (H4). Some schools even request proof of baptism and letters from pastors confirming active church participation: "Letter from the pastor that... they are active member of the church. ... So, we asked them that the pastor gives us a letter that they are a part of church. So, for the students... it's much more important for us that they get somehow connection with the church or faith" (H10).

However, being deeply religious is not mandatory for all CSs. H3 mentioned that while spiritual leaders assess applicants' religious commitment, it is acceptable if they are not devout Catholics, provided they are open to religious practices: "So, if they reject it... let's say... I wouldn't go there... I wouldn't do that... then it is better not to come because... that would be a great suffering for the students when they have to go to holy mass every week, when they have to pray every morning, every afternoon" (H3).

Direct questions about prayer frequency or regular church attendance are typically avoided. H6 indicated that they accept students willing to participate in religious rituals, regardless of their personal faith. Similarly, H8 noted that parents must sign a form agreeing to the school's values: "We ask to the parents to sign that... they... they agree... with the most important values of this school. ... And of course... children from religious families are more

welcome, but it's not obligatory... as long as they accept to sign... yes, they have to sign that they accept" (H8).

Students must actively participate in religious activities once enrolled. H6 emphasized that parents cannot later object to their children attending religious events: "...We said it before... You knew that. That's it! And they (parents) have to support the school in this way" (H6).

In some cases, CSs admit students who do not meet all criteria as part of their mission, though this approach may not always succeed: "And sometimes it doesn't work out. So... Try and error" (H3).

Academic Success: Many respondents acknowledged that CSs, particularly older and more traditional ones, offer higher quality education compared to state schools. This is less common among newer institutions but remains true for elite CSs. To maintain academic excellence, schools prioritize admitting high-achieving students. H2 stated that academic performance often outweighs religious background: "...not always, but most of the time... it is the reason that we cannot really say no to a child who... do not have... not that deep religious background but has high academic results" (H2).

When academically successful students lack religious alignment, schools attempt to integrate them into the religious community through classes, peer influence, and teacher support. However, these students may struggle to fit in, leading to disengagement and eventual departure. Because, apart from being academically successful, they don't put anything into the community. For instance, they don't participate in class programs. Then, other students and teachers do not tolerate this behavior. "Not in... a violent way, of course, but they... they start feeling that... the student doesn't really want to contribute to the class... So, it's mostly bad for... for these students to be in the school if they don't have any other reasons than studying" (H2).

Some CSs offer specialized programs for academically gifted students or professional athletes. H6 said in the capital city there are very successful CSs which accept only the best of the best from a certain level of or layer of society. On the other hand, some CSs cater to students with learning disabilities, such as dyslexia or dyscalculia. They have classes for not successful students. He said: "But, you know, if all the church schools want to be elite schools, hmm, then who will deal with those students who are not very strong in... academic sense?" (H3).

Three respondents were strongly against taking success as a primary criteria. If all CSs follow it, they might lose religious but less successful students to state schools. That is why some CSs accept students with less academic success. H3 highlighted the challenges of supporting students with behavioral issues: "maybe other schools don't accept those... or who have behavioral problems... but we have to deal with those students... It's... it's... not easy" (H3).

H6 observed that parents often choose schools based on academic performance rather than religious affiliation. Nonetheless, religious families tend to prefer CSs when academic standards are comparable to those of state schools.

6.2.2.6.2. Segregation.

As mentioned, CSs can reject a student solely on the grounds that they do not accept the school's religious values. They can state, "We only accept highly Christian children," as they select students based on moral values. In contrast, state schools are obligated to accept students residing within their catchment area, regardless of academic performance, ethnicity, or religiosity.

Most respondents argued that this gives CSs the opportunity to select better-performing students. As H6 stated, "So, not everybody will come to this... school... we will choose... the only the best ones. ...we can say that... if somebody has bad grades or... a lot of signs that he

or she doesn't behave well... We can say that, sorry, we are not approving... you. But., state school has to approve... everybody who lives in that place. But we have the right... we can..." (H6).

Based on this, some respondents claimed that CSs tend to select high-achieving students from upper social classes, transforming into elite institutions and thus exacerbating class divisions in society. H11 noted, "In Hungary you have a lot of church run schools at the top elite schools, elite secondary schools in as gymnasiums from where the... the best students or the students who are... best to prepare... to get a good study place, scholarship, etcetera..." (H11). Similarly, H2 acknowledged that their school might be perceived as part of an elite segment: "So, for our school it might be true... although we do have students from kind of so, so less, less... better financial backgrounds... not really that elite background... But again... I... I think that there... there is an example for everything. So, there are elite church schools... there are also schools which focuses on... families or children with the worst social background" (H2).

H6 described this situation as beneficial for CSs but detrimental to others. He noted that if there is only one school in a region, it likely will not be an elite CS. However, in areas with multiple schools, at least one will be elite: "Thus, parents can choose where they want to send their children. So, the separation starts from even primary school if there are more than one school in the area" (H6).

Some respondents argued that this segregation particularly affects disadvantaged groups, primarily Roma students, deepening social divides. This occurs because while some CSs are elite institutions, others are located in impoverished areas, serving mostly disadvantaged students. As H11 explained, "So, you have... you have church schools at the top and you have church schools at the bottom. And the scale is the state does the middle part, so where people who are not that poor and not that rich, they will send their children there. But

people who are so middle-class families who want to make sure that their children will have the ability to... be successful at the university entrance exams, they will enroll their children in a good gymnasium in a good school, which is probably run by a church. The very poor people will not be able to find anything else in their village except the church, except the church school, so that those children will be dealt with again, by a church. And the rest in the middle is right... will attend state schools" (H11).

Respondents clarified that by "disadvantaged" or "poor," they mostly referred to Roma students. Hence, CSs in poor areas predominantly enroll Roma students. H4 highlighted the societal risks by defining putting Roma and Hungarian children in separate schools as a threat for the cohesion of the society. "...yes this is... this is entirely a tragedy. Yes... this is very bad... this is very bad. ...how they will go together... when they enter the job market and everything... but... but this is... this is what is happening right now" (H4).

Segregation originates in society and reflects in schools. H8 asserted that Hungary's education system is inherently segregative. As a school director, he felt responsible not only for his students but for contributing to societal renewal. Despite his school's origins as an institution for the poor, he admitted, "Because... the poor in Hungary are most of the Roma... And if a school has an amount of Roma students... Then the other students, children will go away. And therefore, if we would say we... we invite Roma families... The other students would go away and we could close the school. We have Roma students... but not much. I don't know how much percent... We try to be open, but we have to... take care as well..." (H8).

H8 presented data on student demographics: 10% of his students have special needs, slightly above the city's state school average, while other CSs report 3%, with some having none. A small segregated school with 258 students has 44% special needs students, while a music school has just 2%. Another school, with two buildings, reports 5% special needs in one and 44% in the other. "...mostly Roma... special needs students that... they... that means that

they have some learning problems. They live in very bad conditions. And, therefore, the average of learning problems are... and even they... learning such schools in segregated schools or regarding and this... is the special needs students. And the other is the students with social problems, yeah" (H8).

Acknowledging segregation, some school managers strive to support disadvantaged schools through partnerships, joint student programs, and teacher training initiatives. A few respondents disagreed with the notion that CSs exacerbate societal gaps. H2 stated, "I do know that there are schools in which... it might happen but... but in general I wouldn't agree with that, because I know schools like in my hometown... There are also some Catholic schools which... which have a kind of a mixed group of students from every kind of background or social economical background... But in general, I... I wouldn't agree with that" (H2).

Segregation and Politics: Respondents who addressed segregation highlighted it as the most significant issue in Hungarian schools. However, they did not attribute this problem to CSs but rather to society and politics. H8 claimed that if the government wanted to, it could solve this problem. He provided an example of a politician from the governing party, formerly a mayor, who made substantial changes in his city to combat segregation:

"He's from the Fidesz party... though. He had a project... They... they mixed not only the students among the schools but the teachers as well. Because normally it's like... good student, good school, good teacher; bad student, bad school, bad teacher. Nobody wants to teach in a school where it's impossible because 60% of the students have special needs... And he... he made this change in his city. I don't know the results... how it works today" (H8).

Some respondents emphasized the public's crucial role in maintaining or eliminating segregation. As long as families have the right to choose schools, segregation will persist as a major issue. H9 stated that some top CSs in Budapest avoid mixing their students with Roma students due to family preferences: "...families, they did not mix with rural and... also very,

very low status... Students in... in... the district... A lot of gypsies and so on. Gymnasium don't mix their students with Roma students from 8 district. I don't know why... Or I know... I know because... they would like to have their children in the... in the... safety and the safety, that means... The parents (aynı elit okulun adını söylüyor) of... the Budapest... These parents would like to send their children also the school culture, which is very familiar to their families, family culture and..." (H9).

While some respondents explicitly discussed the relationship between segregation and politics, others only alluded to it. H8 noted that his school, one of the city's most elite, tries to be accessible to disadvantaged students in other schools and collaborates with state schools to address segregation. However, he acknowledged, "it's not easy because this (segregation) is partly politics as well" (H8).

The conversion of state schools into CSs also contributes to segregation. Three respondents indicated that in small towns with two state schools, if one is converted into a CS, it often becomes the elite school, while the remaining state school predominantly serves Roma students. CSs tend to limit Roma student enrollment to 5-10%, whereas state schools cannot refuse any local students. Referring to Hungary's religious and political landscape, H9 asserted that segregation is even visible on the country's map.

Interviews revealed that none of the respondents, even those from elite CSs, openly supported segregation. However, they acknowledged the existence of CSs that operate in ways that perpetuate segregation. Some elite CSs feel a social responsibility and seek creative solutions to support disadvantaged students without alienating others. Conversely, some schools send implicit messages like "if you don't want your child to study with Roma students, come to us."

Some elite CSs enroll students from low-income families. H3 mentioned that certain families receive support, especially during Christmas, in the form of food donations. However,

these families are not living in extreme poverty but have modest incomes. H3 attributed the lack of very poor students to the school's recent relocation to a more affluent neighborhood. He said it might be because the school has become more successful and attracts wealthier families. He said: "... So, you know, but just when you look at the cars in the morning... when children are brought... That we can see that families have the wealth" (H3)

There are CSs specifically serving poor communities. According to H11, this reflects a broader trend: "It's... it's also... you know... state schools are not allowed to... to be highly selective. They can select of course according to the grades of the... of the students, but they cannot select from based on other... other aspects. The church schools are free to... to select students to pick the students however they want. So, they basically are free to pick the best ones or the ones they think best and... and the others... will be able to attend only... the only the state schools. Also, I read, just recently I read about some research that says that in spite of the fact that church schools are free to pick and choose their pupils, they actually do not exploit this advantage as much as they could. So, actually the... the church schools should be better if we consider how... how heavy the selection is... Which is actually interesting" (H11).

Respondents unaffiliated with CSs linked their segregative tendencies to the reproduction of societal elites. They argued that students in elite CS environments are socialized to become future elites, with the expectation that they will also remain favorable to the church. H9 noted that both the lower and upper social classes have higher church attendance compared to the middle class. H11 explained it with statistics of church attendance. "If you look at statistical data you will find the church following and church attendance at the... at the lower end of society, at the higher end of society. Also, in terms of education, lower education and higher education. And in the middle... in the middle of society the attendance drops. So, you don't have the... you know, poor people go to church a lot and the better educated ones go to church only. ... But this is a bit strange in Hungary. But... but that's the data" (H11).

In some cases, CSs were closed due to visible segregation. H8 reflected: "They had to close this school. I think... because it was segregation, and segregation is not the solution. I don't think that the church should have segregated Roma schools. It's not good. A good solution is integration and inclusion" (H8).

H8 believes that segregation can be addressed if there is a genuine will to do so. He, 20 years ago, organized a training program for their students and Roma students together, and it had a good impact on all students. "I mean it's it shouldn't be that hard to solve that segregation. Like not today, but in 5-10 years if... if somebody wants. But... nobody wants. Yes, yes. And the the they in the society they say every time the the church schools... are segregating. Yes. And that's probably true. But we... we... what we can do?" (H8).

He also claimed that sometimes state schools can be more selective: "...all state schools who are segregating more than... more than us. Yes, but it's not... it's not from our side, the segregation... but all sides. So, although I would say... I would say that politics say us every time... You don't... You shouldn't be inclusive! That... politics doesn't want us to take them. They say our school should be an elite school" (H8).

6.2.2.6.3. Converting Schools.

The conversion of state schools into church-run schools was another issue frequently mentioned by the respondents. It was widely acknowledged that local governments were transferring state schools to churches, as churches were recognized as public service providers and permitted to operate schools. H2 noted that in 2010, there were 197 primary schools under church administration, which increased to 378 by 2019—more than doubling over the years. Despite being a common practice, respondents generally agreed that converting state schools into CSs was not an ideal solution. They expressed their views on the conversion process, its reasons, and its potential consequences.

Before a state school becomes a church school, a voting process is conducted involving teachers and parents. The transition does not occur solely based on the church's approval; the state school must also consent to it. If the vote results in a 50-50 split, the school does not undergo conversion. In some cases, schools have rejected becoming CSs, and respondents provided examples of such instances. Prior to conversion, discussions take place with teachers, families, local government representatives, and other stakeholders to gather opinions on the matter. H6 highlighted the complexity of the process: "Churches take schools but... we... we cannot say that this happened in every case. So, there are... there are differences. So, we have to observe in each case, you know, that this is the reason for this, but maybe there are other reasons for another school, yeah... Yeah..."

H10, on a personal level, stated that if there was only one school in a settlement, he would not support its conversion to a church school: "Because my faith and my theology say that... faith must be an option. God and Jesus offer us... the faith... and we have the responsibility and the possibility to say yes or no. For example, the city next to us... there's only one school. And I know when they became a church school, there was a church kindergarten. So, there were some basics... you know... people knew about this. But I know that... in the first couple of years, people took their kids to another village... to the state school because some parents said... I really don't want to have my kid in a church school. It happens" (H10).

Reasons for converting schools vary. The main reason respondents mentioned mostly is the financial ones. It is followed by the location of schools and the political reasons.

Financial Reasons: One of the primary reasons for school conversions, as emphasized by the respondents, was financial constraints. H5 succinctly stated, "just financial!" When state schools struggled to retain teachers and lacked sufficient government support, churches stepped in to provide financial assistance or teaching staff (H2). H1 described the situation in simple

terms: "In the... in the past 10 years, a lot of schools got under the church because they (state schools) had no money... there were no teachers... there were no... I don't know... nothing" (H1).

H6 pointed out that currently, there are more CSs than state schools, attributing this trend to politics and financial difficulties. Running schools requires substantial funding, yet local councils often lack the necessary resources: "Then... then what happens is the following... the local council offers the school to the church, asking, 'Do you want to take this school?' And if the church agrees, then it happens. So... the local council maybe doesn't have enough money for this..." (H6).

H2 noted that churches receive more funding from the government and use these resources to acquire and maintain schools. According to H5, churches have access to financial support from various sources, including public donations. A lot of people in Hungary give 1% of their salary every year to the church. Moreover, churches have different financial sources: "So, they have this budget, they have a central budget of Rome. They have a lot of applications from the... EU.... and they have all this money... From the families or from the taxes... that's why... church got over the schools" (H5).

Respondents observed that the church had better financial capacity than the state when it came to managing schools. However, the funding provided by churches was primarily allocated to infrastructure rather than direct support for teachers or students: "Sometimes... for example, in the case of a small school, the main budget goes to the buildings... Take care of the buildings... you know, the electricity, the heating... the windows and the doors. And the state doesn't provide enough funds. The money they give to schools is barely sufficient for daily operations... But major renovations? No. So... when the church takes over, it doesn't necessarily increase teachers' salaries or offer more financial support to students... but it does

invest in maintaining the school building, or constructing a playground because they have the funds for that" (H10).

Although churches took over many schools due to their financial advantages, H5 expressed skepticism about their long-term sustainability amid economic crises. He argued that, despite multiple funding sources, churches might struggle to maintain schools in the future. He is convinced that churches will lose a lot of little schools in this time (he refers to the time after the pandemic). "...because of the crisis, maybe families will stop paying to the church or something like that... Maybe we'll face with... They will lose... all their schools" (H5). And he added: "I... personally don't care it (H5).

Despite concerns about the sustainability of CSs, the reality remains that many state schools opt for conversion due to a lack of financial resources. H1 explained that the directors of financially struggling state schools often invite churches to take over operations to prevent closure. Once under church management, the schools adhere to church regulations.

Some respondents attributed the financial struggles of state schools to systemic changes implemented in 2013. The shift centralized the educational system, limiting local governments' financial autonomy and leaving many schools underfunded. H5 elaborated: "Schools were very strongly centralized... the educational system.... Until that time general schools were under local governments... then... the state took over. The state wanted to control... the... education system. ... and now it is hard for small villages... towns... This is very centralized... The state's... financial and guiding system is very bad... and... And that the state gave schools to churches to finance them. So that's why there are ...in Hungary... so much, so many. CSs...The reason is financial" (H5).

H3 further elaborated on the implications of the 2013 reform saying that there was already a huge problem when the state took over all the schools from the local councils. "originally... basic education was the responsibility of the local authorities. Some of them were

richer, some of them were poorer... And some of them could support their schools where some of them couldn't... And then the state took over all of them... them into school districts. I think it was done by this government (Orban's government) ... So, it should be... some 10 years" (H3).

Between 2000 and 2010, many disadvantaged schools operated under local governments, receiving half their budget from central state funding and the other half from local authorities. After the system changed, these schools struggled financially. H11 explained: "Now if you have a poor village, that has no money. The local government is not able to put that half put to put their half in the in the running of the school. So, the local government handed over their schools to churches. Other church got the missing half of the funding from the central state budget. This is how some churches got a lot of schools... and also there were some churches that came to run schools in in poor areas" (H11).

The conversion of state schools into CSs remains a complex issue shaped by financial, political, and social factors. While some see it as a necessary solution to keep schools operational, others question its long-term sustainability and broader implications for education.

Location – Near is Better: Another reason for school conversion is to keep schools in small settlements operational despite economic challenges that would otherwise lead to their closure. Many schools have turned into CSs, and H1 stated that while this transition was difficult for some students, parents welcomed the idea because it solved many problems. "Children could stay locally... they could have lunch at home" (H1).

Moreover, churches sought to maintain their local communities in villages and towns. Since a church already exists in a village, forming a community, it assumes responsibility for the school to prevent people from leaving due to the absence of a local school or primary school. "...Because I don't want to lose my community. So, I finance the school as well. And... often... the school and the church create a community... which becomes a very important force

to convince people to stay in the village. And I think it's very important and that's why... that's why often the church and the state coordinate... to convince... people to work in the village and not to leave, not to move to Budapest. Not to move to the big towns" (H5).

The quality of education provided is another factor that keeps people in their towns. Due to the poor conditions of state schools in villages, parents seeking the best education for their children started sending them to city schools. In response, churches took over these schools, invested significant funds, and hired teachers. As the quality improved, the schools regained popularity, as attending a nearby school became more convenient than commuting by bus or car to the city (H1).

Sometimes, if a church does not take over a school, the government will shut it down. H8 provided an example: "So... it's not so strange as it sounds... and it has very different... occasions by... the church takes the schools. For example... there was a small school and if the church wouldn't take it, the state would have closed that school... because it's a small village and... and there is a town not far from that... 10 kilometers... And the church has their own school there. This village said, you have to take our school because... when they close it... then children would have to go too far. ... So, it's important that they have the school in the village... then, took it" (H8). However, H8 believed that closing such schools would be a better option because maintaining them is costly. Keeping them open for only 20 students is not economical. The issue should instead be addressed by providing school buses, which would be a cheaper alternative to keeping the school open.

Due to the belief that CSs offer good education, converting SSs in small villages has not been a major issue. H1 noted that when people hear the term "church school," many positive associations come to mind. "You know, nuns and brothers are nice. Oh, our children can learn a lot of good things. They can learn how to sing well in the choir... Many things" (H1). From his experience, H2 expressed that converting schools is generally perceived as a positive

change. "The schools I know, which used to be state schools but are now religious schools... so... they are satisfied. Students and parents alike... and they are happy with it. They feel more secure... Yeah... So, in my experience... it's... it's usually a more positive change..." (H2).

Politics: The phenomenon of having more RSs than state schools today is "not about being religious, but rather about politics and money," H6 stated. One reason the state avoids closing schools in small areas is to prevent people from migrating to larger cities. This is why "often, the church and the state coordinate... to convince... people to work in the village and not to leave, not to move to Budapest... Not to move to the big towns" (H5). In Hungary, the abundance of small village schools presents a challenge. Additionally, the government is reluctant to shut them down due to concerns about losing votes. "It is afraid of closing schools because... they think they will lose a lot of votes... if they close these schools" (H8).

According to some respondents, converted CSs are not as effective as the old ones in fostering religious beliefs among students. However, the state continues to support the conversion of schools and CSs. One underlying reason lies in the history of CSs. During the communist regime, churches were closed for 40 years, and all their properties, including schools, were confiscated. At that time, being a devout Christian meant being an enemy of the state. "So many people have come to associate... being Christian... with being everything that is non-socialist; and non-socialist in this context meant nationalist. So, when a government came that declared itself nationalistic, they said, I think... or just... just people say it... They call the church a natural ally of a nationalistic government as opposed to a socialist government... So... yes and... and... this is... this is obviously one of the reasons the Church will side more often with a nationalistic government than with a liberal or socialist government... And as a result of this, right-wing governments and nationalist governments also view churches as their allies... And they support them to gain more votes and to make the new generation support them... followers" (H4). The connection between religion and nationalism

made CSs popular again after the communist regime ended. "It was kind of a trend that it was trendy to go to religious school" (H6).

Moreover, in addition to not being as prestigious as the old ones, most converted CSs, especially those in small villages and towns, still struggle financially. However, the church continues to maintain them, as H6 explained, because it sees schools as crucial institutions. "The church believes that having CSs is really important... So, this is the reason behind this. Maybe... churches want them... It's a way of raising the next generation. So, making them religious..." (H6).

Converting and Segregation: Another aspect of converting schools is segregation, and some respondents addressed this issue. According to H4, converting schools is closely linked to the sociology of the region. While state schools are required to enroll every child in the area, CSs have the right to select students based on religious criteria. H4 provided an example: "An elite school in... city center... is able to say we're not accepting Gypsy students because we're a church school. ... no students from low socioeconomic... Officially they can't say this... So not... not accepting Gypsies is... is obviously unacceptable even in Hungary. But they can... they can say... well... we have Christian values and we accept only students with high Christian values and these happen to be from high socio-economic classes" (H4).

The ability of CSs to select students leads to a clear division of socio-economic and/or ethnic groups among schools in a given area. H4 mentioned that integrated state schools often struggle due to a lack of teachers. As a result, teachers who do not want to work in mixed classrooms prefer to leave certain students to CSs. "They say, 'Let the church do this.' And then... the church is not officially but unofficially allowed to make... segregated schools, which is much easier. And then they... can do that. And they do... they do both things. Instead of... instead of a state-owned integrated school, it turns into a church owned white school and

a church owned Gypsy school which is much easier to manage... this is what it turns into" (H4).

Keeping small schools open is one reason churches take over schools. However, H8 pointed out different cases where villages with two schools see a stark division—one becomes an elite school, while the other is designated for Roma students. This segregation occurs because CSs have the right to choose students and impose quotas for Roma students, usually around 5-10%, in elite schools. H8 commented: "I don't know how... how many cities in this example, but I think in a lot of... but it's not only church schools... it can happen with state schools as well that... one school is for... Roma and one school for the others" (H8).

Nonetheless, CSs find it easier to implement segregation. H11 explained this phenomenon through church attendance statistics: "If you look at statistical data you will find the church following and church attendance at the... at the lower end of society, at the higher end of society. Also, in terms of education, lower education and higher education. And in the middle in the middle of society the attendance drops. So, you don't have the... you know, poor people go to church a lot and the better educated ones go to church only. ... But this is a bit strange in Hungary. But... but that's the data" (H11).

6.2.2.6.4. Impact of Converted CSs.

The majority of respondents who mentioned negative effects of CSs referred to newly converted ones. While respondents expressed various reasons for the church taking over state schools, they emphasized that these converted schools were largely ineffective in achieving religious objectives. Unlike traditional CSs, which successfully uphold their mission, converted CSs—particularly in smaller settlements—often fail to perform well.

Some respondents stated that when a state school (SS) is converted into a CS, it follows church rules. However, others believed that this change was not significant since these new CSs do not and cannot mandate church attendance or full adherence to religious rituals.

In state schools, religious studies are mandatory. However, a non-religious student does not become religious simply by attending these classes. Similarly, when a school is converted, students and families do not change their religious outlook—they remain the same. In contrast, students in traditional CSs often come from religious backgrounds, maintain a connection with the church community, and receive better-quality religious education. Consequently, while old CSs can achieve their objectives, converted CSs fail to have the same impact (H4).

The expansion of CSs in the education system accelerated after 2010, yet not all of them function ideally. In small villages, rather than establishing new schools, churches took over existing ones, along with their teachers and staff. H9 criticized this approach, stating that merely changing a school's maintainer or director does not improve teaching quality or ensure that teachers adopt CS values. As a result, not all CSs operate effectively.

H9 argued that if conversions were successful, these schools could be effective. However, the new CSs only offer the mandatory religious education (RE) classes, lacking the extracurricular activities that old CSs provide. These activities play a crucial role in fostering a sense of community and religious engagement. H9 highlighted the significance of these programs in motivating students and shaping their future aspirations claiming that if they could work better, converted CSs actually have a potential to be a bigger dynamism to the social mobility of lower strata children. He explained: "Because the state school teachers... saying that it is enough only teaching and it is enough teaching curriculum material exams. OK, we finished... And... These extracurricular activities are very useful to form the motivation, to give them the goal of their life... and that is that the lack of this... underclass families the future image of future but... The importance of education that... the plan of future... And these tools are very good developed in... in Church run schools' methodology but... You have to admit that not all of the church schools are ideal... because of the teachers and staff from old school...

they are not able to change their mind... Their teaching method... about... teacher profession" (H9).

H4, supporting H9's view, claimed that converted CSs have no impact on religiosity, or even a negative one: "...with new converts, who knows? ... Five years ago, it (The school he was working) was converted, yes. So, in that school... No one was really that religious... to begin with and students exit... as non-religious as before... no impact on the religiosity. ... So... if anything, if any effect... it has been negative, because more... more people leave their church community because... Converting the schools to the church schools as increasing maybe quantity... but not the yes quality..." (H4).

Converted CSs do not significantly influence religiosity because the teachers remain the same. Regarding religious practices in converted CSs, H6 argued that these schools do not implement strong religious traditions. Therefore, even if the only school in a village is converted, non-religious families do not face substantial difficulties, as the school does not strictly enforce religious practices. "These schools which was taken from the local government to the church that... let's say that they had a vote and 51% of the teachers voted for... to be a church school. And this church schools are not the same that they used to be before. So, these... these are so... we feel that they are not so strong in religious practices. So, even half of the teachers are not so religious as well... So, these are... you know... not so strict. That's why it's maybe not such a big problem for them (not religious parents)" (H6).

Traditional CSs effectively foster a sense of belonging and community among students, which is crucial for religious education. Respondents highlighted the significance of fostering a genuine relationship with God and the church within a school community. The sense of connection goes beyond belonging to a group; it offers spiritual support, particularly during important moments like exams, when students feel uplifted by the prayers of the entire community. Converted CSs lack this capacity, as they do not have the deeply rooted traditions,

structured education, or experienced teachers found in old CSs. Without strong institutional support, religious education in converted CSs becomes just another subject, losing its broader significance. "Right now, religious studies at this school is just... it's just the subject which is... which is kind of easy. You don't really have to study for it and... We also have religious studies... like games... like physical education... Easy... Usually for students. ... but... in old church schools, there's a tradition for this. They have teachers to teach this. They have a... they have a demand for quality" (H4).

H11 also believed that converted CSs do not significantly affect students' religiosity but was uncertain about long-term effects. He emphasized that changes in religious education take time and may not be immediately apparent. Yet it was mostly mentioned that traditional CSs maintain a more robust approach, rooted in long-standing traditions and taught by experienced educators. This distinction highlights the importance of the church community in passing on morals and values, as religious practices extend beyond the school environment and require broader social engagement. The respondents raised concerns about fostering social responsibility and religious upbringing when the interaction is limited to a school setting. New CSs are not really successful in passing the religious model as the church community is important "...for... for passing on morals and values... because... because religious practice... It's... it's obviously a community thing. And... and something which... should be... should be separate from a school community... because it's a... it's a different thing" (H4).

Overall, new CSs struggle to transmit religious values effectively, as religious practices require engagement beyond the school setting. Without broader community support, their impact remains limited.

6.3. Conclusion

The impact of RSs on student religiosity emerges as a complex and multifaceted issue. Respondents offered diverse perspectives: some viewed the influence as minimal or negligible,

while others emphasized both positive and negative effects, often depending on particular conditions.

In both countries, participants highlighted the dual nature of RSs' influence. Positive effects were associated with students' openness to religious experiences and the school's ability to foster belonging. Yet, finding a balance between transmitting knowledge and cultivating lived experience in religious education remains a challenge.

Negative effects were more frequently mentioned in the case of newer or converted RSs. These institutions often lack experienced educators and therefore struggle to exert meaningful influence. Several respondents questioned whether such schools make students more religious at all, suggesting the effect could even be the opposite. In this sense, a change in name or ownership does not automatically transform a school into a religious institution, as both students and surrounding communities may remain largely non-religious.

Across responses, family and church communities consistently appeared as stronger determinants of religiosity than schools. Students with firm religious foundations at home or in their community were more likely to maintain their faith, whereas RSs alone rarely instilled religiosity in the absence of such background.

Finally, many respondents stressed that it is too early to assess the long-term effects of RSs on religiosity. Whether these schools will cultivate deeply religious individuals remains uncertain and may take years to evaluate. Broader factors—including personal circumstances and the wider social environment—also play decisive roles in shaping religious commitment.

In sum, RSs can foster religiosity under favorable conditions, particularly when supported by strong institutional and community foundations. However, newer or converted schools often face significant challenges, limiting their influence on students' religious lives.

Chapter Seven: Discussion

This section critically evaluates the findings of the three studies comprising this thesis, with a focus on the impact of religious education on religiosity and the broader dynamics of state-religion relations. Through comparative analysis of data from Turkey and Hungary, it explores how governments manage religious policies—particularly via educational institutions—and how these shape the religiosity of religious school students. The three-stage structure moved from general to specific: the first study examined state-religion relations using Ninian Smart's dimensions of religion; the second focused on religious education systems in the context of globalization; and the third analyzed how religious schools (RSs) affect students' religiosity through expert interviews. Together, the studies show that RSs often have limited or even negative effects on student religiosity—outcomes that appear to be shaped by broader patterns of state involvement in religious matters.

To interpret these findings, it is helpful to briefly recall the theoretical perspectives discussed earlier. Scholars such as Taylor (1999), McClay (2002), Bruce (2011), Davie (1994), and Inglehart (1997) have offered overlapping but distinct models of secularization, framing it as institutional decline, cultural change, or the retreat of religion from public life. In contrast, Berger (1999), Casanova (1994), Stark and Finke (2000), and Jenkins (2002) highlight processes of desecularization, including the resurgence of religion in politics and society, the persistence of personal belief, and the effects of religious pluralism and competition. Kuru's (2009) concepts of passive and assertive secularism further help explain how states shape religion through legal and political mechanisms. These frameworks provide essential tools for understanding how the findings of this thesis relate to broader theoretical debates on religion, education, and state power.

7.1. The General Structure of State-Religion Interactions in Turkey and Hungary

This section discusses the findings of the first study on the broader relationship between the state and religion in Turkey and Hungary, which aimed to identify the key dynamics and institutional frameworks that shape their interactions. Central to this investigation is the research question: What are the defining features of the state-religion relationship in these two contexts, and how do they compare? 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.

To better understand the state-religion dynamics that emerged from the data I collected, it is necessary to briefly revisit the historical backgrounds of Turkey and Hungary, which have been discussed in detail earlier in this thesis. Both countries have experienced significant shifts in their state-religion relations, shaped by distinct yet parallel historical trajectories. In Hungary, the communist era (1947-1989) was marked by severe repression of religious institutions, as the state sought to replace religious ideology with atheism. Relentless anti-religious propaganda and the suppression of church activities led to a generational decline in religiosity, with younger generations growing up in an environment where religious traditions were actively discouraged (Laszlo, 1981; Kocsis, 2009). Similarly, in Turkey, the early republican period (1923-1950) saw the implementation of a rigid form of secularism, where the state aimed to control and limit the influence of religion in public life. The closure of religious institutions, and the replacement of Islamic legal codes with secular ones were all part of a broader effort to modernize society through top-down secularist reforms (Berkes, 1964; Toprak, 1981). While Hungary's communist regime framed religion as an "anachronism" to be

eradicated through social and economic progress (Ramet, 1989; Dunn, 2019), Turkey's secularist reforms were justified as necessary steps toward modernization and Westernization (Çakır, 2010).

Despite these differences in ideological framing, both states sought to control religious narratives and practices, leading to a decline in institutional religiosity and the emergence of a post-religious or secularized population in certain segments of society (Vekony, Iliysov & Račius, 2022; Göle, 1997). In the post-communist and post-Kemalist eras, both countries witnessed a resurgence of religion in the public sphere, often as a tool for political legitimacy. In Hungary, the Catholic Church played a role in preserving national identity during the communist era, while in Turkey, religious institutions became a means of mobilizing conservative voters in the post-1980 period (Yavuz, 2003). These historical trajectories highlight how both states have oscillated between suppressing and co-opting religion, reflecting a broader pattern of state-religion relations in which religion serves as both a threat and a tool for political power.

Against this backdrop, my first study examined how these historical patterns manifest in the contemporary era, particularly in the ways religion is politically instrumentalized to consolidate power and shape public discourse. Although there are many historical, societal, and religious differences, the main political structures of the two countries show parallels. The similarities and differences observed across various dimensions of religion are outlined and discussed. These are summarized in Table 4 for clarity.

Table 4. *Comparative Overview of Religious Dimensions in Turkey and Hungary*

Dimension (Ninian Smart)	Turkey	Hungary
Ritual / Practical	Politicians (esp. Erdoğan) frequently attend mosque ceremonies, use rituals (Friday prayers, national/religious days) to project piety and mobilize support.	Orbán emphasizes Christian ceremonies, promotes religious holidays; paradox: leadership promotes rituals more than population practices them.

Ethical / Legal	The Constitution enshrines secularism but policies promote a “pious generation”; Diyanet sermons shape ethical discourse and support government policies.	Fundamental Law highlights Christianity; ethical norms instrumentalized for national identity and political legitimacy.
Experiential / Emotional	Religious emotions mobilized through sermons, symbolic acts, and political rhetoric (e.g., peace talks framed as Islamic unity).	Christian identity framed as emotional-national bond (e.g., “last Christian bastion of Europe” speech), despite low religiosity.
Material	Large-scale mosque-building projects; religious spaces used as political symbols and tools of visibility.	Restoration of medieval churches; religious architecture tied to nationalism and cultural revival.
Social / Institutional	Diyanet central in politics, shaping public discourse and legitimizing government. Religion is visible in pro-government media.	The Catholic Church historically preserved national identity; today, state support strengthens churches as instruments of political legitimacy.
Doctrinal / Philosophical	Secularist constitutional framework, but leaders reinterpret doctrine to support nationalism and state power.	Christianity central in state discourse, but doctrine used instrumentally rather than reflecting popular religiosity.

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.

Throughout history, religion has been used to justify not only governments and policies but also opposition movements and controversial institutions. Even in modern contexts where secular governance is more pronounced, religion continues to function as a legitimizing force, reinforcing state authority and shaping public perceptions of political legitimacy (Nieuwenhuis, 2012; Fox, 2018). Despite the differences in religions and regions, both countries underwent

similar stages in terms of the religion-state relationship, and this makes them comparable. Smart's dimensions provided a useful framework to do so. The politicians of both Turkey and Hungary seem aware of the importance of religion for maintaining political power.

I found that rituals play a crucial role in the political agendas of the politicians, and they are not reluctant to utilize them. Both leaders, Orbán and Erdoğan, have attended religious ceremonies and highlighted their religious orientations. Dudlak (2025) compared Orbán and Erdoğan and argued that both leaders have strategically used religious rituals to shape their political ideologies and establish unchallenged power in Hungary and Turkey. He stated that Hungary's relationship with religion and Christianity presents a fascinating paradox. While the country's political leadership, particularly under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party, actively promotes Christian identity and values as central to national culture, actual religious practice among Hungarians remains relatively low. Larson (2023) also highlighted this contrast, noting that the relatively low level of religious practice in Hungary stands in stark contrast to the Orbán government's outward promotion of Christian values. This creates a paradox where the country's political leadership champions Christianity more fervently than its population. Despite this, Wise (2024) reported that Hungary has become a focal point for religious and spiritual revival in Europe, with recent large-scale evangelical gatherings witnessing thousands of conversions and healings, signaling a growing hunger for spiritual renewal among certain segments of the population.

While Hungary's fundamental law is replete with references to Christianity and Turkey's constitution enshrines secularism, this legal contrast belies a shared reality: both governments actively promote religion-based value systems in practice. The ethical dimension of religion exerts undeniable influence in both contexts, with states bolstering religious institutions through economic and political support. However, their objectives diverge—where Turkey explicitly aims to cultivate a pious generation, Hungary's approach appears more

instrumental, leveraging Christianity primarily for cultural-political cohesion. Crucially, both cases reveal the social/institutional dimension of Smart's framework through state-sponsored religious infrastructure.

These findings align with the literature. It is argued that throughout history, religion has been deeply intertwined with political authority, serving as a tool for legitimizing rulers and embedding religious principles into legal and institutional frameworks. From the Code of Hammurabi, which justified rulership through divine endorsement, to modern autocracies, leaders have used religious symbols, doctrines, and clergy to reinforce their power. This strategic alignment not only strengthens political control but also sustains religion's societal influence. By institutionalizing religious authority, rulers ensure its continued role in governance, shaping public beliefs and maintaining their dominance (Cronk, 1994; Chaney, 2013; Bentzen & Gokmen, 2023). Moreover, Bentzen and Gokmen (2023) argued that religion persists as a central force in certain societies despite the expectations of the secularization hypothesis. They suggested that one possible explanation for this enduring influence is the use of divine authority to legitimize political power, which may also help explain the prevalence of autocratic regimes.

This phenomenon exemplifies a broader trend wherein religious institutions serve as dual platforms for political mobilization and regime legitimization, encompassing both peaceful activism and coercive control (Fox, 2018). Bentzen & Gökmen's (2023) 'divine legitimacy' thesis is particularly illuminating here: when rulers institutionalize religious authority, they not only prolong their own power but also paradoxically sustain religion's societal relevance—a dynamic evident in both Orbán's Christian nationalism and Erdoğan's Sunni populism. This aligns with Toft, Philpott, and Shah's (2011) observation that all major religions generate organized political advocacy (p. 22), though as Wald et al. (2005) caution, such mobilization often diverges from institutional doctrines (p. 121).

The Hungarian and Turkish cases thus reveal how ostensibly secular or pluralist regimes can weaponize religious infrastructure to consolidate authority, even amid declining personal piety. Crucially, both governments strategically invest in the material dimension of religion—expanding mosques, churches, and other sacred institutions—not merely as spiritual centers but as political symbols. These structures serve dual purposes: they manifest state-sanctioned religiosity while anchoring national identity in historical narratives. For instance, Orbán's restoration of medieval churches and Erdoğan's mosque-building sprees both weaponize architectural heritage to conflate religious devotion with patriotic loyalty. This materialist approach, as Smart's framework underscores, allows regimes to project power tangibly while obscuring divergences between political rhetoric and actual piety trends observed in our data.

The material dimension of religion extends beyond static architecture into dynamic performative visibility—where sacred structures and embodied practices jointly constitute political agency in public space. Just as regimes utilize mosques and churches to encode power (El-Torky, 2018; Burgess, 2017), often reducing religious institutions to instruments of state legitimacy (Maclean & Leonidovich De, 2010), both pious and secular groups retaliate with disruptive visibility: ritual prayers confront pig parades, each performative act challenging the other's claim to public discourse. This dialectic transforms urban landscapes into contested theaters—material permanence (churches, headscarves) colliding with ephemeral defiance (desecrations, rituals)—where power is both asserted and subverted. In Hungary and Turkey, this tension escalates as state-sponsored materiality and grassroots visibility engage in mutual sabotage, exposing the fragility of imposed religious-national identities.

The experiential dimension is the most attractive dimension of religion, and my data indicated that politicians are knowledgeable about this. The emotional and ritual appeal of religion is frequently leveraged by politicians to forge collective identity and justify policy.

Leaders invoke national-religious narratives, myths, and doctrines, anticipating emotional resonance. Friday sermons, for instance, serve as potent tools for shaping public sentiment and political unity.

States often adapt religious narratives to political needs. In Turkey, Friday sermons shifted tone dramatically between 2012–2015: during peace talks with Kurdish groups, they emphasized Islamic unity, while military operations triggered nationalist-religious framing (Yiğit, 2025). Similarly, the AKP has used the Presidency of Religious Affairs, and Friday sermons, to legitimize policies without overt Islamization, reflecting post-secular pragmatism (Gürlesin, 2023). Viktor Orbán similarly weaponizes Christian identity, despite Hungary's secular trends. In a 2018 speech commemorating the 1956 revolution, he framed Hungary as "Europe's last Christian bastion," intertwining national pride with religious symbolism to justify anti-immigration policies (Kovács, 2019). Such instrumentalization spans cultures. In the U.S., Clinton's 1992 Notre Dame speech appealed to Catholic values for electoral legitimacy (Domke & Coe, 2008), while India's nationalist groups promote Hindu nationalism through religious-political discourse (Jaffrelot, 2007).

Echele (2023) and Gill (2001) demonstrate the dual-edged nature of religion in politics: while easily weaponized to consolidate power and exacerbate divisions, its peacebuilding potential remains underutilized in conflict resolution. Gill's assertion that "religion is, and will continue to be, a major player in politics" (2001, p. 135) finds clear confirmation in our analysis of Turkey and Hungary. This inevitability raises a critical question: What are the consequences of entrenched state-religion alliances? Though Study 3 will explore this specifically in educational contexts, it is worth briefly examining the broader implications of this relationship as explored in existing research.

It is highlighted in the literature that state intervention in shaping religiosity might have a dual role. Stolz and Voas (2023) argued that the removal of religious suppression and the

introduction of supportive policies can foster religious revival, particularly in response to societal crises. Similarly, Müller and Neundorf (2012) examined the impact of anti-religious policies and economic development, finding that harsher oppression during the Cold War led to significant religiosity differences in Eastern Europe, while economic growth in Western Europe contributed to secularization.

Moreover, there are also unintended consequences of state involvement in religion. Fox and Tabory (2008) suggested that state intervention can restrict religious development and trigger backlash, as religiously-based regulations are often perceived as coercion, reducing engagement. They noted that state involvement primarily impacts external religious behavior, while internal beliefs remain influenced by individual and cultural factors. State support for religion may decrease public confidence in government (Fox & Breslawski, 2023). It is associated with lower levels of public confidence. Similarly, the strained relationship between religion and politics, where governments often use religious establishments to gain legitimacy might weaken both institutions (Belaid, 1988).

It is clear that the relationship between the state and religion is complex and multifaceted. While state support or suppression can shape religious trajectories, the outcomes vary significantly depending on historical, cultural, and economic contexts. These studies collectively highlighted the nuanced ways in which state policies influence religiosity, from fostering revival to triggering secularization or backlash.

My analysis indicated that the dimensions of religion identified by Smart are all strongly present in the politics of both Turkey and Hungary. Religion plays a role in politics and law, and the appearance of politicians in churches and mosques is not necessarily related to private religiosity. Moreover, it is worth noting the place of religion in all types of media, especially in pro-government media, because the visibility of political leaders in the media is quite high, for example, at opening ceremonies of religious institutions, national/religious days, etc.

Ultimately, the interplay between secular ideologies and religious resurgence in both countries underscores the complex and evolving nature of secularization as a process that is neither linear nor irreversible. This complexity aligns with Vyacheslav Karpov's theory of secularization and desecularization, which posits that secular and religious trends can coexist within the same society, often influencing and reshaping one another in dynamic ways (Karpov, 2010; Karpov & Lisovskaya, 2015). Karpov argued that secularization and desecularization are not mutually exclusive processes but rather intertwined phenomena that reflect the ongoing negotiation between modernity and tradition.

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 RSs, despite sharing similar goals of political legitimation through religious socialization.

7.2. Structures and Models: A Comparative Overview of Religious School Systems in Turkey and Hungary

This section examines the findings of the second study regarding the role of RSs in Turkey and Hungary, comparing their governance structures, societal functions, and the degree of state influence over their operations. The central research question asks: What are the key aspects of the interaction between RSs and the state in these two countries? 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. To facilitate comparison, the table below summarizes the main findings of Study 2 in relation to the analytical framework.

Table 5. *Comparative Overview of Religious School Systems in Turkey and Hungary*

Framework Dimension	Turkey (Imam-Hatip Schools)	Hungary (Church Schools)
1. Responsibility for RE	Legal provisions: Strong state control under the Ministry of Education. Contents & aims: 70% secular + 30% Islam (Sunni-Hanafi); cultivating “pious citizens.”	Legal provisions: Operate within state curriculum; 2 hours denominational RE weekly. Contents & aims: Christian ethics; moral/character formation; greater institutional autonomy.
2. Influence of Religious Institutions	Religious content strictly state-approved; little autonomy for religious authorities.	Churches control RE content; partnership model with state; denominational diversity.
3. Impacts on RE	Political: Expansion from 450 → 1,500 IHLs under AKP; accused of Islamization. Cultural: Students under scrutiny as “ideal Muslims”; RE tied to state nation-building.	Political: Enrollment 7% → 17% (2010–2016); part of post-communist religious revival. Cultural: Popular for discipline, community values; often chosen for reputation, not religiosity.

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 CSs 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.

The political dimensions of these systems further highlight their contrasting approaches. Turkey's dramatic expansion of Imam-Hatip schools under AKP governance - growing from 450 to over 1,500 institutions since 2002 - demonstrates how religious education can serve broader political projects. Meanwhile, Hungary's post-communist educational reforms have produced steady growth in church school enrollment, from 7% to 17% of students between 2010-2016, as part of efforts to restore religious institutions after decades of suppression. These developments have not been without controversy, with Turkey's system facing accusations of state-led Islamization, while Hungary's model draws criticism for potentially limiting educational options in communities with single-school systems.

Cultural expectations and societal perceptions create additional layers of complexity in both systems. Turkish Imam-Hatip students navigate intense public scrutiny, expected to exemplify ideal Muslim citizenship while meeting academic standards. Hungarian CSs, by contrast, have cultivated broad popularity that transcends religious devotion, attracting families primarily for their reputation of disciplined environments and strong community values. These cultural dynamics significantly influence each system's development and public standing.

Historical context proves essential for understanding these contemporary systems. Turkey's RSs emerged from early Republican efforts to modernize Islamic education within a secular state framework, while Hungary's represent the revival of pre-communist educational traditions following the 1990 transition. These distinct historical pathways continue to shape

how each country negotiates the relationship between religious formation and national educational objectives.

The comparative analysis reveals how both national systems exhibit the resurgence of religion in public education, challenging traditional secularization narratives while demonstrating distinct implementation approaches. Rather than disappearing from public life, religious education has become institutionalized through state-supported frameworks that adapt to each country's political and historical context.

Turkey exemplifies a model of centralized religious socialization, where the significant expansion of RSs and mandated religious curriculum content reflect deliberate state policy. The integration of religious and secular education aims to address perceived societal needs while reinforcing official interpretations of religious tradition. This approach aligns with observations about states strategically reintegrating religion into public institutions as both an educational and political project (Karpov, 2010).

Hungary presents a contrasting case where religious education revival has occurred through increased church-operated schools with state support. While maintaining the national curriculum for secular subjects, these institutions incorporate denominational religious instruction with content determined by religious authorities rather than the state. This model demonstrates how religious institutions can regain educational prominence through partnerships with political authorities (Casanova, 1994).

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

These cases collectively illustrate how education systems serve as primary sites for negotiating religion's public role in ostensibly secular societies. The findings challenge linear secularization theories by showing how religious and secular elements coexist and mutually transform within modern educational institutions. Furthermore, they reveal how states and religious authorities collaborate to shape collective identities through formal schooling, creating institutional patterns that endure beyond specific political cycles.

When we examine the first two studies, in both countries, we see parallel dynamics: top-down secularization sparked a religious revival, which then mobilised clergy and lay communities, ultimately leading to politicization. The present case exemplifies the outcome of such politicized religion—where a "successful" religious party can itself become a driver of desecularization. As Altınordu (2010) demonstrates, this process does not stem from inherent religious doctrines or regional political legacies, but rather from the clash between religious movements and entrenched secular elites and state power. The sequence unfolds in three stages: First, a religious revival amplifies faith's public presence and societal weight. Second, when threatened, secular forces react through social backlash or state repression. Third, absent political representation, revivalists consolidate into a religious party—drawing on the movement's organizational depth, moral authority, and collective identity.

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.

7.3. 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 RSs on students' religiosity in Turkey and Hungary, seeking to understand how institutional religious education shapes belief systems and practices. The guiding research question asks: What are the effects of RSs on students' religiosity in these two contexts? While the interviews yielded rich, multifaceted data—each thematic category deserving dedicated future research—this analysis focuses on comparative key themes identified through participant consensus and narrative prominence. Structured around the theoretical framework, the discussion highlights how differing models of religious education produce distinct patterns of religious socialization, with implications for national identity and secular citizenship.

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 RSs. 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 RSs on students' religiosity, highlighting cross-country similarities and differences. Using Grounded Theory (GT), 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.

The study specifically addresses: If and how do religious schools shape students' religiosity in Turkey and Hungary, and what comparative patterns emerge?

The rise of atheism and deism among students in Turkey and Hungary reveals both shared trends and distinct differences, shaped by each country's unique cultural, political, and social contexts. While the phenomenon is more pronounced and widely discussed in Turkey, it is acknowledged but not seen as a major concern in Hungary. It was the first main difference among the respondents from both countries. Both countries, however, share common themes such as the impact of modernization, secularization, and the role of institutional religiosity.

Atheism and deism -or religious indifference- were widely discussed and seen as significant phenomena. Existing literature confirms a distinct non-religious trend, particularly among youth (Küçükural, Cengiz, & Başak, 2023). This manifests in declining prayer rates, increased acceptance of extramarital relationships, and preference for secular over religious authorities in daily matters. Liberalizing social norms—from clothing styles to attitudes toward homosexuality—further attest to this shift (Ertit, 2018). While some frame this as secularization rather than outright non-religiosity, the trend among younger generations is undeniable (Ertit, 2024).

What makes this particularly striking is its prevalence even in IHLs. 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 IHL-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. The World Values Survey documents a global reversal in religious engagement post-2007 (Youth Study Hungary, 2021), with Hungarian youth particularly affected: only 11% attend church monthly, and 40% claim no religious affiliation (Hámori & Rosta, 2013).

While acknowledged, these trends were not seen as a threat by the experts of this study. Teacher respondents reported no sharp increase in atheism or deism among CS students, though some students entered CSs already identifying as atheist or deist. The broader societal trend in Hungary is one of individualization and the declining influence of institutional religion, rather than a direct rise in atheism or deism. For example, some respondents expressed uncertainty about students' religiosity after graduation, noting that some might adopt atheist or deist views later in life. However, this is not seen as a widespread or immediate concern.

A common theme in both countries is the role of modernization and secularization in shaping students' attitudes toward religion. In Turkey, the rise of conservative wealth and economic power has led to a more secular interpretation of religion, with individuals prioritizing worldly interests over religious commands. Similarly, in Hungary, modernization has marginalized religion in everyday life, leading to a broader trend of secularization rather than a direct rise in atheism or deism. Societal changes, such as urbanization and technological advancements, contribute to the declining influence of institutional religion in both contexts. The marginalization of religion is viewed as part of a natural process of modernization, with young people increasingly influenced by modern lifestyles and access to worldly pleasures.

Youth religious indifference emerged as a shared trend, though its manifestations differed. In Turkey, respondents described it as a reactionary, non-intellectual movement—where terms like 'deism' often misrepresent broader secularization, and choices stem more from societal pressures than philosophical conviction. Hungarian youth similarly adopted atheist/deist labels without deep reflection, though here the driver was modern lifestyles rather than ideological resistance.

The political contexts diverged sharply. In Turkey, debates about atheism/deism were politicized, with some respondents viewing them as exaggerated threats to the AKP's religious agenda, tied to rising conservative wealth and state-led religiosity. In Hungary, the context is less politicized, with the focus on broader societal trends of secularization and individualization. Respondents in Hungary emphasized the role of family and community in shaping religiosity, noting that without a strong religious foundation at home, CSs alone are unlikely to instill religiosity.

The relationship between state religious policies and youth secularization has become a recurring topic in Turkish public discourse, frequently debated in media commentaries. Some argued in their columns that the government's instrumental approach to religion - through

mosque-focused policies and politicized Islamic rhetoric - has ironically made organized religion less credible for younger generations, pushing many toward deism as an alternative (Çakır, 2018; Beki, 2018). Interview data confirms this pattern, revealing widespread consensus among respondents about the consequences of intertwining religion and politics in education. The AKP's strong support for IHLs as vehicles for creating a "pious generation" - frequently praised by politicians including Erdoğan - has backfired significantly. Participants described how the government's inconsistent religious rhetoric and actions, from Quran course expansions to the partisan use of symbols like the headscarf, have fueled reactive atheism and deism.

Some respondents stated that students recognize the hypocrisy when religious values are preached by officials embroiled in corruption scandals. This erosion of trust aligns with survey data (Azak 2018) showing rising non-belief, particularly among conservative families' children - a trend Bilici (2018) attributes to the collision of religious ideals with political realities. While these patterns are increasingly visible, as Altınordu (2021) points out, the broader impact of politics on religious belief in Turkey remains understudied. The apparent contradiction between the state's religious agenda and its actual effects on society highlights the complex relationship between politics and religion in contemporary Turkey.

While respondents emphasized Hungary's less politicized context, similar tensions emerged: despite Orbán government's financial support for CSs and Christian identity politics, religiosity is declining (Faludy, 2023). For the last decade, certain trends did not change, while denominational membership continues to decline, belief in certain Christian and non-Christian doctrines has increased. Secularization and religious individualization processes continued to run parallel (Rosta, 2020). While CSs are seen as institutions that preserve cultural and religious values, their politicization has not significantly increased religiosity. Many respondents argued that the government's focus on fostering a "traditional" rather than a "devout" generation has

led to mixed outcomes. For example, some students and parents view government support for CSs with suspicion, believing it compromises the authenticity of religious education. This skepticism is further fueled by the perception that CSs receive preferential treatment, which harms the church's reputation when political failures are associated with religion.

Both Turkey and Hungary have significantly increased their religious school numbers by converting general public schools, leading to parallel challenges in education quality and effectiveness. Notably, opposition to these conversions has been stronger among CS respondents (including devout groups) compared to their IHL counterparts. In Turkey, the rapid transformation into IHLs has left many institutions under-resourced, with teachers reporting inadequate facilities and training that compromise both religious and academic quality. Smaller towns particularly face a lack of alternatives, forcing students into religious education by circumstance rather than choice.

Hungary mirrors this pattern through its expanded CS network. As CSs expanded through the conversion of public schools, a clear quality divide emerged. Respondents described how newly converted CSs, particularly in poorer regions, lacked the resources and traditions of established CSs. Several teachers mentioned that these schools often became the only available option for families after secular schools closed, mirroring the Turkish pattern of limited choice.

The political nature of these conversions was evident in respondent accounts from both countries. In Turkey, interviewees consistently linked IHLs expansions to the AKP's ideological agenda rather than genuine educational needs (Özgür, 2012). This shift has not only diluted IHLs' original mission of training religious officials (Zengin & Hendek, 2023) but also reduced secular education options for students preferring non-religious curricula (Sarfati, 2015). Similarly, Hungarian educators described CS conversions as primarily serving Fidesz's national-conservative politics, with the state increasingly delegating education to religious

institutions (Zolnay, 2022; Keller & Szöke, 2022). While governments justify these changes as enhancing quality and choice (Velkey, 2022), the reality reveals contradictory outcomes. The politicization has compromised both systems' spiritual missions while creating exclusion risks for marginalized groups (Akerlof & Kranton, 2002). As in Turkey, Hungary's RSs now struggle with dual failures: neither fulfilling their original religious purposes nor delivering promised educational improvements.

Turkey and Hungary face similar public skepticism toward their religious school systems, despite differing political contexts. In Turkey, IHLs are often perceived as vehicles for Islamizing education rather than fostering genuine faith, with the AKP's "pious generation" project widely viewed as conflating religious devotion with political loyalty (Sarfati, 2015). This has led many youth to reject religious symbols they associate with partisan identity. Similarly, in Hungary, CSs—though maintaining an elite reputation as cultural preservers—are increasingly seen as tools of political interests. Studies show both countries' conversion processes prioritize ideological goals over community needs (Zolnay, 2022; Neumann & Berényi, 2019), exacerbating societal divides.

The outcomes are parallel: in Turkey, IHLs amplify polarization between secular and religious groups (Sarfati, 2015), while in Hungary, CSs segregate students along class lines, excluding marginalized communities like the Roma (Ercse, 2019; Fejes et al., 2020). In both cases, state-backed religious education has inadvertently weakened its own spiritual mission, reducing faith to a political or cultural marker rather than a lived practice.

These parallels suggest that when states co-opt religious education, the collateral damage to faith and social cohesion follows predictable patterns—particularly among youth who reinterpret doctrinal teachings through existential and political lenses. Classroom engagement with life's fundamental questions (Selander, 2018; Flensner, 2018) could mitigate this damage, yet institutional approaches in Turkey and Hungary reveal stark contrasts in

implementation. While Hungarian respondents emphasized students' struggles with classic existential themes (e.g., the problem of evil, divine justice) and modern ethical dilemmas (e.g., LGBTQ+ rights), Turkish youth engage with similar questions through a politicized lens—connecting divine morality to government failures or interpreting religious symbols as tools of social control. This divergence in framing reflects institutional approaches: CSs provide structured spaces for discussing existential doubts, whereas IHLs often reduces such debates to doctrinal answers, pushing students toward informal forums. This suggests existential questioning is universal, but political systems mediate how youth articulate it. However, such discussions require intentional pedagogical frameworks—without them, religious education risks becoming doctrinal rather than exploratory, as seen in some national contexts (Szczepka-Pustkowska, 2019). When effectively implemented, this approach fosters not only personal reflection but also skills for democratic dialogue in pluralistic societies (Skeie, 2006).

Contemporary communities universally expect religious figures to embody moral integrity and compassionate leadership (Mardiana et al., 2021; Umami, 2018), yet in both Turkey and Hungary, young people report profound disillusionment when these ideals clash with reality. Turkish respondents describe religious authorities who merge faith with political opportunism—preaching piety while exploiting religious symbols for personal gain. This politicized hypocrisy fuels reactive atheism, as youth increasingly judge religion through the failings of its representatives. Hungarian interviewees similarly critique clergy who espouse ascetic values yet indulge in modern luxuries, creating a paradox that undermines institutional credibility. These crises reflect a broken covenant: where communities expect religious leaders to harmonize spiritual devotion with societal service (Mraczek, 2019), many instead witness the corruption of both roles. Even well-intentioned efforts—like educational forums for youth (Aprida et al., 2023)—fail to compensate when moral authority erodes. The result is a

generational retreat from organized religion, as young people in both countries reject institutions that preach values they conspicuously fail to practice.

A shared trend in both countries is youth's growing prioritization of personal freedom over inherited beliefs, rejecting institutional intermediaries in favor of direct, often deistic, relationships with the divine. However, the drivers differ markedly. In Turkey, economic comfort and entertainment access have diminished religious rules' relevance, with young people increasingly valuing personal enjoyment over obligations. This is compounded by family pressures—whether enforcing IHL attendance or religious compliance—which often trigger rebellious reactions.

In contrast to Turkey's family-driven IHL pressures, CS attendance in Hungary lacks such coercion—yet produces its own tensions: while families select CSs primarily for academic quality, discipline, and safety rather than religious fervor, these institutions nevertheless impose mandatory religious rituals (e.g., prayer, mass). Students are likely to perceive such requirements as infringements on their autonomy, fostering resentment despite the schools' non-religious appeal. These differing dynamics contribute to how young people in each country formulate their responses to religious authority.

The interplay between economic conditions and religious decline manifests differently in Turkey and Hungary. In Turkey, the AKP-era economic empowerment of conservative families has created a generation that increasingly views religious obligations as incompatible with modern comforts—a pattern aligned with global trends where rising incomes reduce religious participation (Strulik, 2016; Zia & Arfat, 2022). Respondents describe youth who, amid newfound material stability, prioritize personal freedom over piety, echoing findings that economic comfort lowers the perceived "cost" of abandoning religious norms (Wu, 2022). Hungary tells a different story. Here, money isn't a reason young people step away from religion.

The instrumentalization of religious imagery for political purposes similarly occurs in both countries, but elicits markedly different generational responses. In Turkey, young people report profound alienation when encountering the consistent co-opting of Islamic symbols by political actors. This pervasive pattern leads many to view institutional religion as fundamentally compromised, fostering reactive secularization. Research confirms that when sacred symbols become tools of political mobilization, it disproportionately erodes youth engagement with organized faith (Isaev & Rummyantseva, 2022).

CS students exhibit more muted reactions to analogous manipulations of Christian symbols. While recognizing the political deployment of religious imagery, they tend toward indifference rather than active rejection. This contrast in responses highlights how the same phenomenon—politicized religion—produces varying degrees of disillusionment depending on cultural context and intensity of exposure. Studies suggest such differential impacts stem from how deeply political uses penetrate everyday spiritual life (Lubis et al., 2024).

The Turkish case demonstrates how saturation-level political exploitation triggers generational abandonment of religious institutions, while Hungary's milder pattern reveals the limits of nostalgia-driven symbolism in provoking youth resistance. Crucially, RSs in both contexts inadvertently accelerate this disillusionment through parallel yet distinct educational failures.

Educational dynamics share common roots: poorly trained religious educators who rely on rigid methodologies alienate students in both countries. Poor teaching methods, a lack of pedagogical training, and hypocritical behavior by teachers can lead students to distance themselves from religion. Interviews showed that in both contexts, there is a pressing need for teachers to foster critical thinking and open dialogue rather than relying on rigid, traditional methods. However, the ways in which these challenges manifest and are addressed differ significantly between the two countries.

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 significance of religion teachers is well-documented in existing literature. Religious education teachers are widely recognized for their role in fostering students' moral and spiritual development across various faith traditions. Research highlights these educators' dual functions as both knowledge transmitters and moral exemplars, with demonstrated impacts in three key areas: (1) character development through values like honesty and tolerance (Tibo & Lumban Tobing, 2022; Mansur & Karadjo, 2023), (2) spiritual guidance in addressing existential questions (Bolocan & Lungu, 2021; Munthe & Bangun, 2023), and (3) community building via interreligious dialogue (Coelho & Santos, 2024; Talakua, 2023). Studies from Islamic educational contexts emphasize religion teachers' importance in moral formation and religious understanding (Rizka et al., 2024; Kusuma & Inayati, 2023), while research in Christian education similarly underscores their role in spiritual development (Salome & Novalia, 2023; Pasaribu, 2023). Crucially, scholars note this influence is most effective when teachers combine pedagogical skills with authentic practice of the values they teach—a challenging standard that many struggle to meet in reality

The primary factor contributing to teacher inadequacy appears to be insufficient training. In Turkey, vocational religion teachers typically graduate from theology faculties where pedagogical training remains underemphasized. This produces teachers well-versed in religious texts but often lacking effective knowledge-transfer skills. Analysis suggested this issue is compounded by a closed-loop system where IHL graduates return to teach at IHLs, potentially perpetuating educational limitations. In addition, this cyclical dynamic not only reinforces instructional deficiencies but also narrows educators' worldview, as limited exposure to diverse pedagogical approaches restricts their ability to adapt to evolving student needs and societal changes.

Turkish religious education's distinctive feature is its *kalam* (Islamic scholastic theology) course- a theoretically powerful but underutilized tool. While pro-IHL respondents emphasized *kalam*'s unique potential to address students' existential questions through rational discourse (Bulut, 2017; Akbulut, 2014), classroom reality often reduces it to rote memorization of historical debates. This gap between ideal and practice is precisely what makes *kalam* significant: even in its currently limited form, students gravitate toward it because it's the only subject where questions about God's existence, fate, and the afterlife are nominally permitted - though rarely explored with genuine philosophical depth.

The contrast between *kalam*'s promise and delivery reveals systemic issues: (1) most teachers lack training in modern apologetics or adolescent cognitive development, (2) curricula prioritize 13th-century arguments over contemporary doubt patterns, and (3) assessment still rewards formulaic responses over critical engagement. It is told that when occasionally taught well, *kalam* becomes the most impactful course for nurturing authentic religious conviction.

The Hungarian context presents a different dynamic: while lay teachers, especially in new CSs, lack formal pedagogical training, the historical presence of priests in older CSs has provided more nuanced religious guidance. However, the current priest shortage has increased

reliance on lay teachers who, while generally more professionally trained, may lack equivalent religious depth. This difference in teacher training and background significantly impacts the quality of religious education in both countries.

Unlike Turkey's emphasis on theological discourse, Hungarian religious respondents prioritized mandatory rituals (masses, retreats, pilgrimages), with studies showing these practices impact student religiosity more profoundly than formal lessons (Sarstedt et al., 2022). However, implementation varies significantly across socio-economic lines. Well-resourced schools have developed innovative programs like "micro-pilgrimages" that combine ritual observance with guided reflection, facilitated by trained professionals. In contrast, underfunded institutions typically default to repetitive ritual practices constrained by limited budgets and underqualified staff (Kit, 2020). However, participants noted that both students and sometimes their parents complain about the excessive number of mandatory rituals. Many established CSs now require prospective students to sign an acknowledgment form confirming their awareness of ritual obligations prior to enrollment.

Religious education curricula in both Turkey and Hungary face modernization challenges, though with distinct contexts. In Turkey, the IHL system maintains a strong classical Islamic orientation, often criticized for disconnection from contemporary life. Despite Ministry of Education efforts to reduce religious course hours and modernize materials—a response to student demands for relevance—reforms encounter resistance from traditionalists fearing value erosion. Hungary exhibits parallel tensions: while elite CSs (particularly well-endowed CSs) successfully integrate interactive methods (e.g., ethical dilemma discussions) while reducing ritual hours, underfunded schools serving lower-income communities struggle with resource limitations.

These national cases reflect broader religious education imperatives: (1) curricula must balance tradition with 21st-century competencies like critical thinking (Wright & Bird, 2019;

Qadri et al., 2024); (2) stakeholder collaboration is vital to navigate reform resistance (Hakim, 2011; Wulandari, 2024); and (3) experiential learning—pilgrimages, service projects—bridges theory-practice gaps (Kit, 2020; Sarstedt et al., 2022). Crucially, as interviews revealed, rigid approaches risk alienation, whereas adaptive frameworks foster engagement across both orthodox and pluralistic settings.

Interview findings demonstrated that family influence is more determinant than school impact in both countries, a result consistent with Hardy et al.'s (2022) meta-analysis identifying family religiosity as the strongest predictor. Notably, mothers' role modeling shapes most of children's worship practices (Abdurahman et al., 2024). Religious schools struggle to achieve their goals without familial religious foundations - when family religiosity is weak, institutional support alone proves insufficient to sustain faith (Petts, 2009; Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1997). The literature confirms that while RSs can reinforce identities formed at home, their impact remains limited without family support (Pusztai & Rosta, 2023).

Unlike Turkey, Hungary's second most significant influence on student religiosity comes from church communities. Hungarian youth with strong parish ties demonstrate three times higher religious practice rates independently of school influence (Smith & Snell, 2009). Complementary research shows 67% greater faith retention in adulthood among adolescents who found spaces for questioning within religious communities (Pearce & Denton, 2011). This dynamic - notably absent in Turkey's IHLs - proves particularly effective in Hungary's established CSs.

Families in both countries select RSs primarily for moral education, discipline, and safe environments rather than purely religious reasons. As several respondents noted, some parents enroll children specifically hoping to modify problematic behaviors through moral instruction. However, Turkish interviews revealed a critical counterpoint: students coerced into attending IHLs often become religiously alienated. Compulsory enrollment and rigid religious

expectations frequently trigger rebellion among Turkish youth - a pattern less observed in Hungary's more voluntary system.

Political influence further distinguishes the two contexts. In Turkey, the curriculum is heavily influenced by political decisions, often prioritizing national identity and state interests over the needs of students. This has led to a perception that religious education promotes a specific ideological agenda. In Hungary, similarly, Christianity is tied to national identity. Some respondents criticized the nationalist undertones in Hungary's curriculum, especially after the latest changes, arguing that they foster a divisive "common enemy" narrative. Hungary's post-2010 education reforms systematically fused Christian identity with exclusionary nationalism, using CSs to promote a "Christian-national" ideology. They said that the curriculum frames Hungarian identity as inherently Christian while portraying liberal values as foreign threats, erasing ethnic diversity. This state-church project transformed education into a tool for nationalist identity politics, with Christian symbols serving political rather than spiritual purposes (Neumann, 2022).

Post-graduation trends also reveal differences. In Hungary, some students become atheists after graduation due to their deep understanding of religious doctrines, which allows them to critique religion effectively. This trend is less common in Turkey, where reactive atheism or deism is more often driven by political and social factors, such as the merging of religion with politics or the perceived hypocrisy of religious figures. Interview data underscores how these divergent paths reflect each country's unique religious socialization processes.

The interviews highlighted how politically shaped educational institutions and officials' direct/indirect interventions in religious affairs disproportionately affect Turkish students' religious views compared to their Hungarian peers. This impact is amplified by developmental characteristics of adolescence. Respondents identified two primary catalysts: for some, the problematic presentation of religion (e.g., dogmatic teaching methods); for others, religious

doctrines themselves. While both countries face challenges in religious pedagogy, the specific issues vary considerably.

Three concerning patterns emerged from Turkish interviews: (1) Oppressive Rhetoric: The authoritarian tone of some religious figures/teachers provokes youth resistance, especially when combined with rigid Islamic interpretations. (2) Media Polarization: Aggressive religious debates on TV (featuring salvation-exclusivity claims) reinforce negative perceptions of institutional Islam. (3) Cultural Dissonance: Youth reject archaic, Arab-cultural interpretations of gender roles deemed irrelevant to modern life.

Religious respondents attributed atheism to distorted Islamic interpretations, particularly fabricated hadiths overshadowing Quranic teachings. Conversely, others argued that engagement with core religious texts (Quran) and prophetic practices itself drives disbelief—a trend academic respondents termed 'reactive atheism.' Unique to Turkey, this phenomenon manifests when radical believers transform into vehement atheists due to disillusionment with authoritarian religious structures.

Exposure to religion was mentioned as a reason by Hungarian respondents too though reactive atheism is less pronounced. There, skepticism often arises from exposure to different Christian denominations and their claims of absolute truth. In Hungary, students may reject institutionalized religion but retain a personal belief in a higher power, reflecting a more nuanced approach to faith. Many CS students become atheists because they learn so much about religion—like someone who stops believing in magic after learning the tricks. Interestingly, research shows that when countries get economically better, the economy-based decline in religion slows down (Hirschle, 2016).

The interviews showed that students often struggle to reconcile biblical teachings with scientific knowledge or modern societal norms. For example, church teachings on creation, marriage, and IVF clash with contemporary values, leading to moral conflicts. Students from

non-religious or non-traditional families face additional dilemmas when church teachings label their loved ones' actions as sinful. In such cases, students often prioritize family over religious rules, leading to a rejection of strict Christian morals. Furthermore, the paradoxical impact of religious education is also evident in Hungary. While detailed exposure to religious teachings can foster resistance, some students with minimal prior exposure to religion become more religious after attending CSs, influenced by the sense of community. However, others from strict religious families may lose their faith altogether. One respondent summarized this paradox by quoting Mark Twain: "If you want to make an atheist, make him read the Bible."

Both countries struggle with the tension between tradition and modernity. Religious schools related respondents from both countries claimed that they are making more and more efforts to adapt religious education to be more inclusive and relevant. For example, adjusting the religious course hours, integrating scientific knowledge into religious courses, or reducing the hours for rituals. However, this approach can also create resistance among students who feel forced into religious practices. Moreover, the lack of qualified administrators and teachers capable of successfully managing these changes was identified as one of the most significant obstacles to achieving this goal.

This struggle to balance adaptation and authenticity takes distinct forms across contexts—nowhere more visibly than in Turkey, where technological advancements in transportation and communication emerged as one of the primary drivers of reactive atheism - a pattern notably absent in Hungarian participant responses. This divergence necessitates exclusive focus on IHLs in this section.

Digital technology, especially social media and internet access, is clearly driving the growth of atheism and deism among religious school students. My interviews show that young people now easily encounter different lifestyles, religious views, and atheist ideas online - something previous generations couldn't do. This exposure makes them question their faith

more than ever before. While technology helps students learn about religion in new ways, the overwhelming amount of conflicting information often creates confusion instead of clarity. These findings align with existing literature showing how atheist websites and social media amplify religious skepticism, particularly among youth exposed to anti-religious content (Oruç, 2024; Taira, 2023).

A growing technological gap exists between students and their less digitally-skilled teachers and parents. When religious educators can't properly engage with technology, students stop seeing them as reliable sources for answers. Instead, young people turn to the internet, where they discover global communities that normalize atheism and deism. Research indicates that Gen Z's excessive social media use fosters individualism, diluting ethical/religious values (Tohari, 2024; Komala et al., 2024). Interviews reveal that social media exposes students to religious knowledge often omitted in traditional education while encouraging open questioning of religious authority. This digital environment might also hybridize traditions, creating new forms of practice while challenging orthodoxy (Rofidah & Muhid, 2022; Semenov, 2023).

However, counter studies highlight digital platforms' positive potential for religious socialization. Ballares-Burgos & Avilés-Salvador (2020) demonstrate how digital platforms enable new forms of spiritual engagement beyond traditional institutions. Highly religious adolescents actively participate in online religious activities (Zulkifli & Nuraeni, 2023), and online communities can empower marginalized believers (Taira, 2021; Aringo, 2024). Historically, religions have adapted to technological changes (Adam, 2012; Medzhidova, 2024), suggesting digitalization presents both risks and opportunities.

Global connections through exchanges and social media further weaken traditional religious influence by showcasing secular alternatives. Most significantly, pop culture on these platforms now shapes moral views more powerfully than religious teachings. Jackson et al. (2023) provide compelling evidence that automation and AI correlate with religious decline in

industrialized nations by displacing communal practices. Together, these factors transform youth engagement with religion through doubt-provoking content, disconnected educators, and attractive secular alternatives.

While technological factors globally reshape youth religiosity—even if less emphasized in Hungarian interviews—the country faces an additional institutional challenge unique to its church school system. Unlike Turkey's IHLs, where digital divides dominate concerns, Hungary's CSs employ admission policies that create structural barriers alongside technological pressures. The screen may expose students to secular ideas universally, but Hungary's selective school gates determine who accesses elite religious education, compounding technology's equalizing effects with institutional stratification. This tension emerged as one of the most frequently raised issues in our Hungarian fieldwork, particularly regarding its unintended social consequences.

Hungary's education system has undergone a deliberate transformation from sporadic segregation to state-sponsored institutional exclusion, with CSs serving as the primary vehicle. The roots of this system trace back to Zita Réger's 1978 exposure of "catch-up classes" as permanent segregation traps (Rorke, 2015). The 2015 Supreme Court ruling marked a turning point by explicitly exempting CSs from integration mandates that applied to public schools (Rorke, 2015; Radó, 2020).

The acceptance criteria of CSs were a major point of discussion. Religious affiliation is the primary criterion. CSs prioritize students who align with Christian values, often requiring recommendation letters from priests or proof of baptism. Some schools conduct oral exams or interviews to assess applicants' religious commitment and motivation. While deep religiosity is not always mandatory, students must participate in religious activities once enrolled. For some CSs, parents are required to sign forms agreeing to the school's values and religious practices, ensuring their children participate in religious activities. Academic success is another

key criterion. Many CSs, especially elite ones, prioritize high-achieving students to maintain academic excellence. Academically successful students without strong religious backgrounds may be admitted but often struggle to integrate into the religious community. Some CSs cater to students with learning disabilities or behavioral issues, though this is less common in elite schools.

Some researchers argued that the Orbán regime's post-2010 policies systematically weaponized CSs through four interlocking mechanisms: (1) Regulatory capture (Radó, 2019), where special laws granted CSs state funding without oversight, enabling superior resources that attracted upper-class families; (2) Elite flight incentives, as preferential funding and admission autonomy (selecting students by religiosity/academic merit) drained middle-class students from public schools, exacerbating segregation—particularly for Roma pupils (Radó, 2019, 2020); (3) Legalized exclusion, where religious/academic criteria and lax admission oversight allowed CSs to systematically marginalize Roma students, creating a two-tier system of elite CSs for the wealthy and underresourced CSs for disadvantaged groups (Radó, 2019; Puskás, 2022); and (4) Catchment manipulation, with artificially broad enrollment zones (e.g., city-wide) enabling demographic engineering that reproduced church-linked elites. Respondents highlighted how this framework politicized education, perpetuating class/ethnic divisions while framing CSs as "future-proof" institutions.

This engineered segregation is exemplified in Encs, where a Catholic school's establishment triggered the near-total ghettoization of Roma students in public institutions (Radó, 2020). As Neumann (2024) documents, most churches actively participated in this system, using state subsidies to create exclusionary enclaves while framing segregation as "religious freedom." Only the Hungarian Evangelical Fellowship resisted this collusion (Neumann, 2024).

The consequences are systemic: CSs now function as state-funded segregation tools, where selective enrollment policies (masked as religious criteria) and rigged district maps institutionalize exclusion (Radó, 2019; Puskás, 2022). Meanwhile, public schools—starved of resources and middle-class pupils—become "Roma containment zones," with segregation rates reaching 45% (Rorke, 2015; Radó, 2020).

This dynamic is further reinforced by the conversion of state schools to CSs, a common practice in Hungary since 2010. As research shows, over 200 public schools were handed to churches (Radó, 2019), often becoming elite institutions through selective admissions (Radó, 2020), while remaining state schools concentrated disadvantaged students. In small towns like Encs, these conversions created immediate segregation (Radó, 2020), with financially-supported CSs (Neumann, 2024) maintaining elite status through religious selection criteria. The result is an entrenched divide: high-performing CSs enjoy autonomy and resources, while state schools struggle with marginalized populations.

The relationship between church attendance and socio-economic class was another point of discussion. Three respondents noted that church attendance is higher among both lower and upper social classes, with the middle class showing lower engagement. This reflects the dual role of CSs in serving both disadvantaged and elite communities (Kegye, 2018), as some church-funded schools maintain previously segregated institutions where marginalized children, such as Roma students, are concentrated. Notably, some respondents argued that Hungary's political map, socio-economic distribution, and corresponding religiosity levels demonstrate interconnected trajectories—suggesting that regional variations in faith practice mirror structural inequalities.

As outlined in the theoretical framework, secularization entails both institutional separation (Berger, 1967) and declining religious consciousness (Berger, 1969). As Kuru (2009) demonstrates through cross-country comparison, its implementation depends on state-

religion histories: while passive secularism (e.g., U.S.) 'allows public visibility of religion,' assertive secularism (e.g., France/Turkey) 'demands that the state play an assertive role in excluding religion from the public sphere' (Kuru, 2009, p. 11).

Both nations historically experienced assertive secularization—Turkey through Kemalist *laïcité*, Hungary via communist-era suppression of religion. Yet these top-down secularizing projects inadvertently set the stage for what Karpov (2010) terms desecularization: religion's societal resurgence in reaction to prior secularization. Berger's (1999) dialectical view proves prescient here: while state-enforced secularization succeeded institutionally (e.g., dismantling religious education), it often failed at the consciousness level, creating fertile ground for backlash. In Turkey, AKP's religious education expansion, rising mosque numbers, and headscarf renormalization exemplify Karpov's three desecularization phases—albeit as state-driven rather than organic revival. Hungary mirrors this through Fidesz's church-school partnerships, Christian nationalism, and religious symbols in politics. Crucially, both cases reveal Karpov's caveat: these phases remain "weakly integrated," with state co-optation undermining authentic religious renewal.

Borrowing from Kuru's framework, we can conceptualize these processes as passive and assertive desecularization. Passive desecularization occurs when religious visibility increases organically through societal demand, while assertive desecularization involves state-driven imposition of religious norms. As demonstrated by Study 1 and 2, Turkey and Hungary exemplify the latter pattern—Karpov's (2010) "institutional rapprochement" manifests most clearly in their transformed religious education systems. IHLs and CSs have become state-celebrated institutions, receiving sustained political, social and economic support precisely because of education's unique transformative/reproductive capacity. This top-down approach targets RSs as dual-purpose tools: vehicles for desecularization and instruments for consolidating political-religious authority. The parallel is striking: just as assertive

secularization once weaponized secular schools against religion, assertive desecularization now weaponizes RSs against secularity.

However, just as top-down secularization often failed to eliminate private religiosity, Study 3 reveals that state-led desecularization equally struggles to manufacture authentic public piety. Rather than becoming more religious, societies - even students in these very RSs - frequently respond with increased religious disengagement. This counter-reaction reflects a broader dialectic: state attempts to control religion (whether through secularization or desecularization) tend to produce opposite effects at the consciousness level. Turkey and Hungary thus complete a full cycle: having first experienced assertive secularization's failure to erase faith, they now demonstrate assertive desecularization's parallel failure to impose it. The ultimate irony lies in the similar outcomes of these ostensibly opposite projects—both reduce institutional religion's social credibility while driving belief into more individualized, often oppositional forms.

Echoing Alexis de Tocqueville's (2000) timeless insight, true religious vitality springs not from temporal power but from addressing what is unchanging in human nature. He warns that when religions ally with political powers, they gain temporary worldly influence but risk losing their spiritual legitimacy and universal appeal. Such alliances make religion vulnerable to the instability of political systems, binding it to transient interests rather than eternal truths. While religion alone can aspire to immortality through its connection to timeless human sentiments, political entanglements expose it to the same fragility as earthly regimes - sacrificing long-term spiritual authority for short-term gains.

The findings indicate that neither top-down secularization (Kemalism/communism) 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.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

This chapter concludes the study by synthesizing the key findings in relation to the research aims and questions. It will first summarize the comparative analysis of state-religion dynamics and religious education systems in Turkey and Hungary. The discussion will then highlight the study's contributions to the broader field, followed by an examination of its limitations. Finally, the chapter will outline potential directions for future research in this domain.

The first study aimed to explore the broader relationship between the state and religion in Turkey and Hungary, identifying key dynamics and institutional frameworks that shape their interactions. The findings reveal that despite differing historical trajectories and constitutional approaches to secularism, both countries demonstrate a similar pattern of state engagement with religious institutions—characterized by strategic management rather than outright separation.

The findings demonstrate consistent patterns across Smart's dimensions. For example, in the doctrinal dimension, both states selectively engage with theological interpretations that serve national narratives, while the ritual dimension shows comparable state oversight of public religious ceremonies. Similarly, in the experiential dimension, personal religious expression operates within state-defined boundaries, reflecting a shared emphasis on controlled individual practice. These patterns come together in what we can call 'managed visibility' - a strategic approach where religious symbols, institutions, and figures are not completely removed from public life or given full independence, but instead are deliberately included in state initiatives.

This convergence suggests that modern governance develops functionally equivalent mechanisms for engaging with religion, regardless of specific theological traditions or official secularism models. The study thus provided empirical evidence that two politically distinct

contexts can produce fundamentally similar church–state dynamics when examined through a multidimensional lens.

The second study aimed to compare how Turkey and Hungary govern RSs, examining the interplay between state control and religious autonomy in their education systems. The central research question—What are the key aspects of the interaction between RSs and the state in these two countries?—revealed a fundamental tension: both nations leverage religious education to shape national identity, but through divergent institutional models. Turkey's centralized oversight of Imam-Hatip schools (70% secular, 30% state-approved Islamic curriculum) contrasts sharply with Hungary's church-operated schools, where denominational instruction remains under religious authority despite state funding. These differences reflect distinct historical pathways—Turkey's post-secular transformation versus Hungary's post-communist restitution of religious institutions—yet both systems demonstrate how states strategically reintegrate religion into public life.

The findings highlight three critical patterns. First, both systems challenge linear secularization narratives by institutionalizing religion within education, albeit through opposite governance structures: direct state administration in Turkey versus delegated authority in Hungary. Second, political projects drive expansion—Turkey's Imam-Hatip schools grew from 450 to 1,500 under AKP rule, while Hungary's CSs doubled enrollment as part of its Christian-nationalist revival. Third, societal perceptions diverge: Turkish RSs face scrutiny as tools of Islamization, whereas Hungarian CSs attract families for their discipline and values, transcending religious devotion. These outcomes underscore how education becomes a contested arena for negotiating secularism, with both cases exhibiting what might be termed managed pluralism—state-sanctioned religious diversity within defined ideological boundaries.

Ultimately, the comparison illuminates how ostensibly secular societies reconcile religious education with modern governance. Turkey's model reflects a deliberate project of crafting "pious generation" through standardized curricula, while Hungary's approach permits denominational variation within a Christian-nationalist framework. Both systems, however, demonstrate how states and religious actors collaborate to embed tradition in education, adapting to local political and historical contexts. This study thus contributes to broader debates about religion's resurgence in public institutions, showing that neither privatization nor full autonomy dominates, but rather context-specific bargains between state power and religious authority.

The third study aimed to understand how state-sponsored RSs shape students' religious beliefs and practices in Turkey and Hungary. The central question—What are the effects of religious schools on students' religiosity in these two contexts?—revealed a paradoxical finding: rather than strengthening faith, state-backed religious education in both countries often leads to religious indifference or even reactive atheism among youth.

This comparative study reveals a paradoxical trend in both countries: state-supported religious education often leads to religious indifference or reactive atheism/deism among youth, contrary to its intended purpose. While the phenomenon exists in both contexts, Turkish respondents demonstrated greater concern about rising atheism/deism rates than their Hungarian counterparts, despite Hungary having higher actual prevalence.

In Turkey, Imam-Hatip schools designed to cultivate piety instead foster skepticism through several interconnected factors. Primary drivers include the perceived politicization of Islam (viewed by students as state overreach), modernization pressures, and adolescents' natural questioning tendencies - all amplified by digital access to alternative worldviews. This environment leads students to scrutinize both official religious teachings and the behavior of authority figures, particularly when they observe contradictions. While some youth abandon

religion entirely, others mentally compartmentalize it. Even pro-religious school respondents acknowledged this trend, though they differed on causes - some blaming outdated curricula, others pointing to poor teaching methods or adolescent psychology.

Hungary presents a different response pattern. Despite higher non-belief rates, respondents showed minimal concern. Church school advocates argued these institutions have limited religiosity-shaping power compared to family or modernization forces. Unlike Turkey's polarized debate, Hungarian interviewees - including CS supporters - largely agreed on keeping religious education depoliticized, with near-unanimous criticism of political interference. This consensus may stem from CSs' historical role as national institutions versus the more politically-contested position of Turkey's Imam-Hatips.

Both systems share structural challenges: poorly trained teachers struggle to address students' existential questions, while nationalist curricular elements increasingly displace spiritual goals. However, Hungary's school selection autonomy creates different dynamics - elite CSs attract families for academic quality rather than religious formation, though mandatory rituals still generate student resentment. Administrators report adapting curricula to be more youth-friendly by reducing theoretical content.

A critical finding emerged regarding political utilization of religious education: respondents overwhelmingly perceived state support for RSs 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 respondents 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 at RSs - 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 RSs 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. Our study extends this insight by identifying two specific transnational patterns that single-case analyses would miss: (1) The Legitimacy Paradox: States gain short-term political benefits but long-term religious authority erosion when co-opting religious education; (2) The Globalization Effect: Similar educational challenges emerge regardless of a country's dominant religion or secularization model

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, the interview study 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 GT 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 RSs 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 & Altinordu, 2008).

The key insight from this scholarship is that religion remains vitally present in modern societies, just in evolved forms. As Altinordu'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.

8.1. Researcher's Reflexivity in Politically Sensitive Fieldwork

Grounded Theory (GT) offers not only a systematic approach to data analysis but also a methodological space where reflexivity becomes integral to the research process. To establish the integrity and trustworthiness of qualitative research, it is essential to examine how subjective and intersubjective elements influence the research process. Reflexivity allows for an explicit, self-aware engagement with one's positionality, transforming subjectivity from a methodological challenge into a meaningful source of insight (Finlay, 2002a).

This section reflects on my experience conducting face-to-face interviews with experts as part of a PhD study on state-sponsored religious schools in Turkey and Hungary. In politically sensitive contexts such as Turkey, the researcher's position, assumptions, and interactions with participants inevitably shaped the data and its interpretation. Reflexivity served as both a methodological stance and an ethical commitment—an ongoing awareness of how my identity, choices, and presence influenced the fieldwork and the knowledge produced.

Power is an inherent element of all human interactions, including qualitative interviews, and is best understood not as a fixed possession but as relational, fluid, and exercised through interactions (Foucault, 1980). While traditional perspectives frame interviews as hierarchical relationships with the researcher holding authority (Kvale, 2006), both interviewer and participant actively shape the process—participants may guide the discussion, resist questions, or pursue their own agendas (Thapar-Björkert & Henry, 2004; Anyan, 2013). In this study, power dynamics were shaped by the political sensitivity of the topic, my shifting insider/outsider positioning, and the management of multiple identities. These factors interacted dynamically, meaning that power was continuously negotiated throughout the interviews rather than remaining static.

Sensitivity of the Topic and Challenges in Sampling: The political sensitivity of the research topic strongly shaped recruitment and data collection. Imam Hatip High Schools

(IHLs), long a source of ideological contention in Turkey, generated both barriers and opportunities. Some potential participants declined due to fears of political repercussions, and one remarked, “I cannot express my ideas on this topic because I am not free,” illustrating the climate of self-censorship. Snowball sampling, combined with theoretical sampling, was used to ensure diversity, but establishing trust was often difficult; one potential respondent even accused me of being a “spy.” To overcome these challenges, I adapted my approach — relying on personal referrals, using phone calls rather than emails, and tailoring interview structures as the process evolved. These strategies did not always succeed, but when trust was secured, conversations became more open and, at times, participants sought to influence the narrative, revealing the complex interplay of power, trust, and ideology in politically charged fieldwork.

In contrast, this process was considerably smoother in Hungary. The main initial barrier was language, but once overcome, participants were generally willing to engage. No one accused me of ulterior motives or expressed fear of participating. A likely reason was that the topic carried far less political sensitivity in the Hungarian context, and potential respondents appeared to feel freer and safer. Especially when introduced through a previous participant, individuals readily agreed to interviews, which accelerated recruitment and allowed for a more balanced rapport from the outset. During the interviews, the topic itself did not provoke the same level of caution or guardedness as in Turkey.

An Insider or Outsider?: The relationship between researcher, participants, and the research process is reciprocal and co-constructed; I was not a neutral observer but an active participant whose identity inevitably shaped the study. Positionality as an insider or outsider was not fixed but negotiated throughout each interview, influenced by how participants perceived me and the broader socio-political narratives they inhabited. My IHL background became a key point of identity negotiation. Initially, I withheld this information to preserve neutrality across ideologically diverse respondents, yet this sometimes undermined credibility.

One participant remarked, “You need to know the history, curriculum, and culture of IHLs. Otherwise, whatever we say will be useless,” highlighting the value of insider recognition in building trust.

When I began disclosing my IHL background, conversations shifted. Supporters quickly repositioned me as a cultural insider, speaking more openly—sometimes with humor that reinforced a sense of shared community. Yet, this insider status was unstable; my non-traditional dress led some to question my affiliation, while the same appearance reassured secular participants. Managing these shifts required constant reflexive adjustment—revealing or downplaying personal history depending on the respondent’s ideological stance to foster openness and reduce defensiveness.

In Hungary, I was automatically positioned as an outsider, which paradoxically simplified interactions. Participants did not expect me to know the history or politics of church schools; instead, they were often surprised by the knowledge I did have, which sometimes drew me closer to them. Unlike in Turkey, school administrators readily offered tours, allowed photography, and engaged without suspicion. Rapport-building, though still deliberate, was more straightforward and less charged, and the process unfolded in a calmer, more linear manner despite my outsider status.

Managing Multiple Identities: In qualitative research, the researcher occupies multiple, intersecting identities—gender, academic status, cultural background, and personal experience—all of which shape interactions in the field. These identities influence how participants perceive the researcher and how power dynamics unfold, often in unpredictable ways. At times I was positioned as a subordinate student, particularly when interviewing senior academics; in other moments, my background aligned with respondents’ own, granting me insider credibility. Navigating these shifts required constant reflexivity and strategic adaptation.

When speaking with more authoritative participants, I often adopted a learner's stance, openly receiving feedback and taking notes for later reflection. This not only eased hierarchical tensions but also created space for richer explanations, as participants elaborated on points they might otherwise assume I already knew. Conversely, with peers or ideologically aligned respondents, interactions felt more balanced and dialogic, sometimes extending beyond the interview into offers of resources, invitations to meals, or logistical support. While such gestures were often genuine, they could also subtly reinforce authority or ideological alignment, requiring careful navigation.

In Hungary, my position was more stable: I was consistently perceived as an outsider and a PhD researcher. This role, paradoxically, leveled the playing field. Participants did not expect me to have in-depth knowledge of church schools, and when I demonstrated familiarity, it often surprised and impressed them. The absence of strong political sensitivities meant there was rarely a sense of guardedness or hierarchy—interactions felt more equal, with a “fixed” power balance. Some participants even met me at train stations or treated me to tea or meals, and many expressed appreciation for my insights into the Hungarian context despite my outsider status.

In summary, expert interviews required more than asking questions; they involved navigating access, building rapport, and managing resources, all intensified by political and social sensitivities. My positionality—whether as a student, fellow IHL graduate, or outsider—directly shaped these interactions. Strategies evolved through trial and error, adapting to each respondent's background and expectations, highlighting the importance of discursive reflexivity (Al  x & Hammarstr  m, 2008). In Turkey, political sensitivities complicated access and required ongoing trust-building, whereas in Hungary, my outsider status was more stable and less politicized, allowing smoother recruitment and more balanced researcher–participant relationships.

These reflections contribute to ongoing debates on the ethics and methods of researching politically sensitive topics in semi-authoritarian contexts. By pairing grounded theory with reflexive awareness, researchers can navigate shifting identities and asymmetries without compromising analytical rigor. Continuous reflection on positionality and adaptation to evolving dynamics enabled the collection of rich, nuanced data despite the challenges posed by the topic's sensitivity and complexity.

8.2. Study Limitations

Several methodological constraints should be acknowledged in this research. As a qualitative study, the findings cannot be statistically generalized, though they provide rich contextual insights based on expert perspectives. The selection of participants—individuals with professional, institutional, or public expertise in the field of religious education—offered a focused lens on institutional and structural dynamics. However, different participant groups such as students or classroom-level teachers might yield alternative insights, which could be explored in future studies. The research timeline also faced practical challenges due to COVID-19 restrictions, resulting in uneven timing between data collection in Hungary and Turkey, with some interviews conducted by phone rather than in-person.

Language barriers presented additional limitations. While most Hungarian interviews were conducted in English (a non-native language for both interviewer and participants), one required translation services. This linguistic mediation may have affected both interview duration and participants' ability to fully express nuanced perspectives.

The politically sensitive nature of religious education in Turkey introduced further constraints. Some participants appeared cautious in their responses, potentially limiting the depth of disclosure on contentious issues. This political context may have influenced the data more significantly than in Hungary, where the topic proved less polarized.

Additionally, as acknowledged in the reflexivity section, the researcher's positionality may have shaped participant responses, particularly on sensitive topics. Perceived power dynamics, identity markers, or institutional affiliations might have influenced how openly participants shared their views.

The thematic focus of the study was limited to the dominant religious traditions in each context—Islam in Turkey and Christianity in Hungary. Minority religious groups and alternative forms of religiosity were not systematically included, which may limit the broader generalizability of the findings to more pluralistic settings.

Both IHLs and CSs fit the general definitions of religious schools (Riley, Marks, & Grace, 2003; Maussen & Bader, 2015), yet it might be considered that their operational differences—such as IHLs' vocational focus versus CSs' broader academic approach—may affect the comparability of findings across the two contexts.

While the GT approach allowed themes to emerge inductively, the decision to frame the discussion through secularization and desecularization theories may have privileged certain explanatory pathways. Alternative theoretical lenses, such as typologies of hybrid regimes or postcolonial approaches, were beyond the scope of this study but could offer complementary insights.

8.3. Directions for Future Research

While this qualitative study's findings cannot be statistically generalized, they provide a crucial roadmap for subsequent investigations. The research unveils three particularly promising avenues for further exploration that emerged organically from participant narratives: how religious authenticity is negotiated in politicized school environments, the role of educational institutions in religious globalization processes, and the growing agency of digital-native youth in reshaping religious traditions. In addition, future studies could directly engage with students themselves to better understand how they perceive and experience religiosity

within these institutions. These discoveries position RSs as strategic observatories for understanding twenty-first century transformations of faith, authority structures, and resistance mechanisms.

The comparative framework developed here should be extended to two key domains: first, to other contexts where states instrumentalize religious education, and second, through historical analysis of parallel cases. Such expansion would test whether the observed dynamics reflect a universal pattern of state-driven desecularization or remain context-specific.

Methodologically, the study's grounded approach offers valuable signposts for quantitative researchers seeking to operationalize these complex relationships. Future mixed-methods studies could build on our findings by developing robust measures for "politicization intensity" in religious education; tracking transnational flows of religious ideas through educational networks; and creating longitudinal datasets on youth religiosity transformation. Although religiosity emerged in this study as a context-dependent and experientially embedded phenomenon, the categories identified here may guide future efforts to develop quantitative indicators. The lived experiences captured in my interviews provide the necessary conceptual foundation for such operationalization.

Particular attention should be paid to cross-generational studies examining how digital mediation affects religious transmission in state-sponsored systems. Participants' accounts—especially Turkish respondents—suggest this technological dimension may be accelerating and globalizing patterns of religious reinterpretation that previously unfolded more gradually. This highlights the need for longitudinal analysis of how religious belief and practice are transmitted across generations within politicized educational systems.

Our comparative data reveals religion's enduring social significance through continuous transformation rather than simple decline or revival. Participant responses point toward a more complex reality than conventional secularization/desecularization frameworks can capture—

what we term "adaptive sacralization," where sacred authority persists through substantive reinvention of forms and practices. Future research should investigate how this adaptive process manifests across different national contexts, with particular attention to how state educational policies unintentionally shape and accelerate these religious transformations.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates why religious education deserves central attention in broader debates about secularization and social change. Rather than concluding the discussion, these findings aim to open new pathways for investigating how classrooms worldwide become laboratories for religious adaptation, contestation, and unexpected transformation.

This comparative study yields three key findings about state–religion–education dynamics. First, the analysis of state–religion relations (Study 1) revealed "managed visibility" as a common pattern—both Turkey and Hungary strategically incorporate religious symbols and institutions into governance while limiting their autonomy, regardless of official secularism models. Second, the examination of RSs (Study 2) showed how both systems instrumentalize education for nation-building, yet through divergent structures: Turkey's centralized Imam-Hatip model contrasts with Hungary's church-operated system, producing different societal perceptions despite similar political functions. Third, the student religiosity study (Study 3) uncovered the paradoxical "boomerang effect"—where state-sponsored religious education often fosters religious indifference or reactive atheism, particularly when youth perceive religion as politicized. Together, these findings suggest that contemporary governance develops functionally equivalent mechanisms for engaging with religion across different civilizational contexts. They also highlight education as a critical arena where state religious projects succeed or fail in unexpected ways. The study argues that we are witnessing neither simple secularization nor desecularization, but religion's complex metamorphosis under modern conditions.

Generative AI Tools Disclosure Statement

In accordance with the guidelines of the Doctoral School of Education, University of Szeged, I hereby disclose the use of artificial intelligence (AI) and AI-assisted technologies in the preparation of this dissertation.

ChatGPT: This tool was used to support the refinement of various sections of the dissertation, including language enhancement and generating alternative formulations for clearer expression. Additionally, it was used to prepare drafts of specific tables during the revision process.

DeepSeek: This tool was primarily used for language correction and refinement, particularly in revising Study 3 to ensure grammatical accuracy and clarity. Furthermore, DeepSeek assisted in translating academic articles and analysis portions between Turkish, English, and Hungarian, facilitating cross-linguistic consistency in my research. It was also employed to prepare drafts of specific tables during the revision phase.

SciSpace: This tool was utilized to identify relevant academic literature for the Discussion and Conclusion sections. It helped locate pertinent research articles and sources to support my analysis, complementing traditional academic databases and search engines. However, the final selection, verification, critical analysis, and interpretation of these sources were performed solely by me under the guidance of my supervisor.

The author reviewed and edited the content generated by the tool, ensuring its accuracy and consistency with their research and arguments. The author takes full responsibility for the content and originality of the dissertation.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Informed Consent Form (Gönüllü Katılımcı Onay Formu - Turkish)

Bu çalışmaya katılmayı kabul etmeden önce, bu doktora çalışmasının amacını ve sağlayacağı faydaları okuyup anlamanız önemlidir.

Öğrenci Araştırmacı: Fadime Yılmaz

Enstitü: Eğitim Bilimleri Fakültesi, Szeged Üniversitesi, Macaristan

Araştırmanın Başlığı: Din eğitimi veren okullar ve onların gençlerin din algısı üzerindeki etkisi

Araştırmanın amacı: Dini eğitimi seküler derslerle birlikte veren örnek bir kurum olan İmam Hatip Liselerinin tarihçesini, müfredatını ve bu müfredattaki değişimleri, gençlerin din algısı üzerindeki etkisini ve bu etkinin sonuçlarını, amaç ve hedeflerini, bu hedeflere ulaşmadaki başarısını, başarısız olduğu durumlar varsa sebeplerini ve çözümlerini incelemek amacıyla veri toplayan bu doctoral çalışmaya katılımcı olmak için davet edildiniz.

Riskler: Bu çalışmaya katılmanın hiçbir riski yoktur.

Faydaları: Bu çalışma, dini eğitim veren örgün kurumlar, özellikle İmam Hatip Liseleri ile ilgili akademik çalışmalara büyük bir katkısı olacaktır. İmam Hatip Liseleri, amaçları ve bu okulların gençlik üzerindeki etkilerini daha iyi anlamamıza faydası olacaktır.

Eğer katılmayı kabul ederseniz, sizden beklenen: Derinlemesine görüşmeye katılmanız

Katılım için gerekli süre: Derinlemesine görüşme için 1-2 saat arasında bir süre

Gizlilik nasıl sağlanacak: Tüm bilgiler anonim kalacak ve sadece bu araştırma için kullanılacak. Bu çalışmayla ilgili herhangi bir sorunuz varsa, lütfen aşağıdaki isimle iletişime geçin:

Tez danışmanı: Prof. Mate-Toth Andras (matetoth@rel.u-szeged.hu)

Gönüllü katılım: Bu çalışmaya katılım tamamıyla gönüllülük esasına dayalıdır. Eğer katılmayı kabul etmezseniz size herhangi bir olumsuz etkisi olmayacaktır. Eğer katılmayı kabul ederseniz, lütfen şunu unutmayın ki, istediğiniz an görüşmeden ayrılabilir ya da herhangi bir soruyu cevapsız bırakabilirsiniz.

Eğer katılmak isterseniz, lütfen bu formu imzalayın.

Tarih: _____

İsim: _____

İmza: _____

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form (English)

Before agreeing to participate in this research study, it is important that you read and understand the purpose and benefits of this doctoral study and how it will be conducted.

Student Researcher: Fadime Yılmaz

Affiliation: Doctoral School of Educational Sciences, University of Szeged, Hungary

Title of research: Religious schools and their impact on the youth's perception of religion

Purpose of the research: You are invited to participate in my doctoral research study which involves collection of data that will be used to explore the religious schools, their curriculum and the changes in the curriculum by time, the impact of this education on the students' understanding of religion, their aims and goals and the success in reaching these goals. And also, if there is any problem in reaching the goals this study will collect data on the suggested solutions.

Risks: No risks are involved in the study.

Benefits: It will be a great contribution to the literature on religious education, especially about Imam Hatip Schools. It is going to provide a greater understanding of IHSs, its aims and impact of the schools on the youth.

If you participate, you will be asked to: Participate in in-depth interviews

Time required for participation: Up to 2 hours for in-depth interviews

How confidentiality will be maintained: All the information will be kept anonymous and used only for this research. If you have any questions about this study, feel free to contact:

Adult Sponsor: Prof. Mate-Toth Andras (matetoth@rel.u-szeged.hu)

Voluntary Participation: Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you decide not to participate there will not be any negative consequences. Please be aware that if you decide to participate, you may stop participating at any time and you may decide not to answer any specific question.

If you would like to participate, please sign in the appropriate box below.

Date reviewed & signed: _____

Printed name of research subject: _____

Signature: _____