

THE 25TH ANNIVERSARY OF REVITALIZING THE HUNGARIAN ASSOCIATION OF IAHR AND FOUNDATION OF THE HUNGARIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE ACADEMIC STUDY OF RELIGIONS

Facts, Documents and Memories of a Secretary

IRÉN LOVÁSZ

This paper was presented as a lecture at the 10th Conference of the European Association for the Study of Religions, in Budapest, 2011, in the section: “History of the history of religions. Theoretical and/versus historical approaches”. It has not been published since that time. The 25th anniversary gives special topicality to publishing it in 2016.

The timing of the Budapest Conference in September, 2011 whether planned or not, definitely met the very historical moment: the 20th anniversary of revitalizing, re-forming, renaming and re-establishing the Hungarian Association of IAHR and founding the Hungarian Association for the Academic Study of Religions. I appreciated the possibility of Hungary being the host of the international conference of EASR. We did not even dare to dream about it 20–25 years ago. It has been a long way...

The story began in Helsinki, on 19th May, 1990, the last day of a regional conference of IAHR, when Prof. Dr. Michael Pye, the then Secretary General of IAHR asked Mihály Hoppál and me, as he said, to revitalize the Hungarian association, which had been in long-time “agony” by that time.

The Hungarian Association for the History of Religions (Magyar Vallástörténeti Társaság) was founded and run by Imre Trencsényi-Waldapfel (1908–1970) and Károly Marót (1885–1963), scholars of Greek mythology, antiquity and classical philology. It was registered at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Committee: Prof. István Borzsák and Prof. János Harmata (classical philologists). Members: Tibor Bodrogi (ethnologist), Tekla Dömötör (folklorist), Géza Komoróczy (Hebrew and Assyrian philologist), Ferenc Tőkei, József Lukács (Marxist philosophers), Károly Czeglédy, János György Szilágyi. László Kákosy (Egyptologist) joined them in the 60s. They attended the IAHR congresses in 1966, 1970, 1975. The Hungarian Academy paid the annual fee of 120–150 Holland Forints for IAHR.

Since the congresses were organized in distant locations, e.g. in Australia or Canada, the journey there was impossible to afford and to get support for, so the last activity of the Hungarian Association was shown in 1975. Thus the Hungarian Association was considered as dead-and-alive, or a body in a state of suspended animation. No sign of scientific activity has been shown by the Hungarian Association for 25 years.

So Mihály Hoppál and I were practically asked to revitalize the Hungarian Association in 1990. Within a few weeks we started to work. At that time I did not know how difficult it would be. Now I know, what it meant, and what we did.

On 22nd August, 1990 we wrote a letter to the Hungarian colleagues who might be interested: it was an invitation or call for a re-forming meeting to be held on 25th September, 1990. The name of the passively existing Hungarian Association was: Magyar Vallástörténeti Társaság (Hungarian Association for the History of Religions). We informed and invited colleagues of several academic disciplines like: philosophy, sociology, classical philology, studies in antiquity, oriental studies, ethnography, ethnology, theology, linguistics, history of literature, art and music.

At the first assembly we elected the new board demonstrating continuity and having respect for the elder scholars too:

President: László Kákosy

Vice-presidents: Mihály Hoppál, Miklós Tomka, Lajos Boglár, Pál Horváth

Treasurer: Éva Pócs

Secretary: Irén Lovász

The board represented a wide range of academic fields: Egyptology, sociology, philosophy, ethnography, cultural anthropology. Some of the members have already passed away during these years. There was a demand for giving a representative as a vice-president from each discipline. That is why we had 4–5 vice-presidents, which might seem unusual in such a small association.

Then we witnessed a vivid interdisciplinary discussion among ethnologists, anthropologists, philosophers and sociologists on defining our frames and methods of the study of religions. It caused scientific discussions and also personal, disciplinary tensions, and jealousy.

The main points I must underline, were the following:

There were no academic institutions for the Study of Religions (Vallástudomány) in Hungary at that time. Researches and studies were conducted by individuals in different disciplinary fields independently, and often at a high level of excellence. Though it was obvious that great individual researches had been done by outstanding and highly respected Hungarian scholars during the past decades, there was not sufficient interdisciplinary communication among the scholars of religion. There were no university departments and no independent academic discipline for the study of religions at that time in our country.

Some of the different disciplinary experts (sociologists, philosophers) were rather sceptical and jealous of building up a new umbrella organization. They were reluctant to share the field with others, or collaborate with them, especially with ethnographers or anthropologists.

For instance Miklós Tomka, the sociologist of religion announced our intention to establish a department or an association of Scientific Study of Religion. He got rather a mixed reaction: "The theologians would not accept it. They would not like anybody else to speak about religion. They have about enough of the Marxist criticism."

Let me note that sociological studies of religion was basically theologically motivated and controlled at that time. The Center for the Sociological Study of Religion could be found within the National Pastoral Institute, in the same building as the Catholic Publishing House and the editorial office of Catholic Journals and ecclesiastical stores. It was a rather chaotic period of political changes of the late communism, with changes of all the systems. The study of religion in Hungary in that special political period seemed to turn from the control of Marxist criticism to the control of theology.

It caused a very difficult situation for the independent and scientific studies of religion. Later the Bologna system brought new chance of establishing university departments and academic units. Fortunately several Departments of Study of Religion (Vallástudomány) were founded in different cities in the following years, thanks to that.

There were some changes in the board during the years, but Mihály Hoppál and I held our position from 1990. As far as I am concerned, in spite of all the (political, academic and personal) difficulties, I did not give up for six years, since I was convinced that there was a historical challenge and we had to develop step by step, we had to fill the academic gap caused by the historical, political facts. I did not know for sure but I hoped that there probably would be institutions for the academic, scientific study of religions in Hungary in the near future. I did not know when and how it would happen, and influenced by international tendencies, towards what kind of disciplinary and methodological directions the Hungarian way might turn, or whether there would be a special Hungarian way at all.

I was privileged to have a strong scholarly and friendly support from the highly respected scholars working in the executive committee and some national committees of IAHR. I took part in several congresses and conferences of IAHR in Rome, Burlington, Vermont, Mexico City. And I also attended the first conferences and assemblies of the European Association for the Study of Religions. In those days during those occasions I had long discussions on the international policy of helping the local, national associations (especially in Eastern Europe, Latin-America and Africa) on a wide, independent academic ground with the highly respected

scholars of the field, like Michael Pye, Armin Geertz, Thomas Lawson, Donald Wiebe, Luther Martin, Rosalind Hackett, who were members of the executive committee of the IAHR, EASR or several national boards. I am very grateful to all of them for their great emotional and scholarly support. My deep scholarly and personal friendship with the Finnish scholars e.g. Prof. Terhi Utriainen and Prof. Veikko Anttonen also dates back those days, and those international conferences.

It became clear for me from time to time that my calling was to help the Hungarian Studies of Religion to be revitalized in official frames and help to put it again into the main academic stream by demonstrating the international standard of studies and achieving the international recognition and acceptance.

My first great task was to organize our first conference on 5th–6th October, 1992 with the title *Alternative Religiosity: Past and Present*. The aim was to understand the historical roots and the theoretical rules of an actual socio-cultural phenomenon from the approaches of different academic disciplines.

We invited scholars to study the dynamics of the official and the alternative, the main and the marginal, the supported and the illegal, the great and the small, the new religious movements versus the old ones in the history of religions. We tried to approach religious ideas, movements, mystical tendencies, ideologies, philosophies, organizations, rituals and genres, appearing, existing either within the frames of the main world religions, or independently of them. We were also interested in the socio-cultural effect, the consequences of these phenomena. We called scholars for interdisciplinary approach of each topic, regarding as many religions as it was possible.

There were 45 papers from philosophers, psychologists, historians, theologians, ethnographers, sociologists, scholars of Tibetan Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Shamanism, New Age, new religious movements, phenomena of folk religions of different kind, and also scholars of history of art and literature.

Our suggested topics were:

1. Contemporary new/ alternative religious movements of different Christian, Oriental origin, secret, mystical and other groups,
2. Socio-political features of religious protest movements,
3. State religion and heresy, “great tradition, small tradition,”
4. Conflict between missionaries and locals,
5. Features of folk religious rites, genres, specialists, groups,
6. Alternative religiosity in literature and art history,
7. Philosophical and theoretical considerations.

It turned to be a great conference which was a real breakthrough in the academic circles. Since we did not get any support, the papers were not published. So I still have some of the papers in the archive as documents of history of the study of religions in Hungary.

In 1993 we organized another interesting conference on the “Notions of the Otherworld.” The approach was again crosscultural and interdisciplinary. In the meantime we organized smaller lectures, meetings with presentation of single papers of Hungarian or foreign scholars, and joint conferences with other academic societies.

Our further important steps were:

In the meantime we accepted the new constitution. After long methodological and theoretical consideration I suggested the new name which would offer a clear, wide and independent academic ground and frame. The General Assembly accepted my suggestion and the new official name is Hungarian Association for the Academic Study of Religions in English and Magyar Vallástudományi Társaság in Hungarian.

We could also achieve that the Hungarian Academy of Sciences paid our annual fee for IAHR. The first official letter acknowledging the receipt of 10000 US Dollars from the MVT as payment for the 1991 annual subscription to the IAHR was signed by Prof. Armin Geertz, the then Honorary Treasurer of IAHR on 29 August, 1991. After years of silence we were officially accepted again as affiliated members of IAHR!

We also received an official registration by the Hungarian Court (08 Aug, 1991) with the new name: Magyar Vallástudományi Társaság, with the address: 1 Pesti Barnabás Street. Thanks to Prof. Donald Wiebe’s kind offer I also could arrange that the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences would get regular free copies of the *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* published in the USA. He as editor-in-chief wanted to be sure that the journal would be available for any Hungarian scholars, that is why I suggested a main library for that.

In Burlington, Vermont, USA I also made an exclusive interview with Thomas Lawson, the president of the American Association for the Study of Religions, the editor-in-chief of NUMEN. Professor Lawson by that time was widely considered to be the founder of the cognitive science of religion field. He published his world famous book titled *Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture*, with Robert N. McCauley in 1990. The text of my interview with him unfortunately could not be published in Hungary at that time.

My short summary of those days at the beginning of the 1990s would focus on the moments of revitalizing the Hungarian Association for the Study of Religions after years of agony and silence during the difficult period of late communism.

Now I know, we wrote the history of science. Since I still have documents, papers, letters, moments of general assemblies of those historical days, I can make a precise historical survey of that period. Let me note that there were no websites, no computers, no files to preserve all the documents – it is already the part of the history of the History of Religions.

It is a great privilege to me to have been able to do this service. It was an important period both of my personal and scholarly life. I did it for 6 years, until my personal and academic life allowed me to do it. The reason why I could not continue any longer, and did not accept new nominations for being a member of the national committee and doing this voluntary work as a secretary was that between 1994 and 1996 I had three children and parallelly I lost both of my academic jobs. So I had no institutional background and no time for doing it any longer. And losing mental support I also lost my courage to do it.

I appreciate the opportunity to share some of the facts, documents and my memories with my old colleagues from all over the world and also with the new generation of Hungarian scholars at the 25th anniversary. I hope scholarly activities and communication will be much easier now and in the future, under new political and academic circumstances, applying new tools of communication and technology, providing new perspectives for scholars of the international study of religions.

Budapest, September 2011–2016