

The Rise of the Science of Religion and Its Separation from Traditional Protestant Theology in Hungary

The Impact of Scholten, Tiele, and Pfleiderer on the Scholarly Work of Ödön Kovács

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Abstract

The study of Ödön Kovács' works demonstrates how Western European liberal scholarship impacted the emergence of the science of religion in the Austrian-Hungarian Empire through J. H. Scholten, C. P. Tiele and O. Pfleiderer. It addresses the issue of how the science of religion was envisioned and explicated by Kovács, a pioneer of the study of religion in Hungary. Second, by examining his first series of articles written as early as 1869 on the science of religion, the article sheds light on the different theoretical premises and methodologies of theology and the science of religion as well as on the impact of Tübingen and Leiden schools of theology. Third, it is pointed out how the emergence of the science of religion was promoted by one of the most talented Hungarian scholars of religion. Finally, an attempt will be made to demarcate the lines of divergence and convergence between the two interconnected academic fields.

Keywords

emergence of science of religion in Hungary – Christian theology and study of religion – philosophy of religion – history of religion – C. P. Tiele – Otto Pfleiderer – J. H. Scholten – Hungary – Dutch and German impact – methods of studying religion

The separation of the science of religion from Christian theology began in Hungary during the course of the nineteenth century (Molendijk 2005: 17). This is not to say that the academic study of religion only evolved from the field of theology (Sharpe 1975: 27, 72, 144, 220). I will suggest that discussions

within the realm of nineteenth century Protestant theology contributed significantly to the emergence of the science of religion across Europe. This development has been mentioned in recent theoretical debates (Bird and Smith 2009).¹ It is enough to think of the impressive, thought-provoking, and brilliant works and writings of William Robertson Smith (1881, 1889; on Smith see Maier 2009), Ferdinand Christian Baur (1824–1825; on Baur see Hodgson 1966), David Strauss (1838–1839; see also Backhaus 1956; and Hausrath 1876–1878), Otto Pfleiderer (1875, 1878), Albert Ritschl (Barth 1972: 654) or Ödön Kovács, a less well-known Hungarian scholar of religion, whose writings on the science of religion I shall discuss in this article. It is perhaps not by chance that Jacques Waardenburg (Waardenburg 1999: 138, on Julius Wellhausen, 150, on William Robertson Smith, 160, on Friedrich D. C. Delitzsch, 174, on Albert Schweitzer, 381, on Nathan Söderblom), Eric Sharpe (1975: 144), Róbert Simon (2003) or other editors often selected some of these Protestant scholars as well. It is so because they deemed their life's achievement highly significant for the academic enterprise of scrutinizing, analyzing, and comprehending religion (Simon 2003).

In this article, I seek to investigate the evolving subject of the science of religion in the context of Hungarian Protestant theology in the nineteenth century. The article shows how Ödön Kovács attempted, in a thought-provoking manner, to elaborate the relation between theology and the science of religion. His essays, studies, and books appearing from 1869 are the earliest reflections on how to pursue an academic study of religion in Hungary. The significance of his work is not well known in Western European academic circles, although he proposed a full program of introducing science of religion into higher education as an academic subject. He chose to execute this strategy in phases. First, he wrote several crucial pioneering articles explaining the importance of the study of the science of religion and its relevance as a new academic discipline, and in 1869 he outlined an argument as to why it was important to introduce it at Protestant Theological Seminaries (Kovács, Ö. 1869a). In this regard, he followed in the footsteps of the two major founders of the science of religion, Max Müller and C. P. Tiele (Sharpe 1975: 31).² Second, in 1871, he contended that the science of religion should also be taught at the state universities of the

1 Owing to the nature of my historical-critical research presented here, I consciously refrained from entering a theoretical debate on Christian or other religions' theology and Religious Studies, although this article relates to the resurgent current debates about their relationship.

2 Müller mentioned the term, "science of religion" first in a work entitled *Semitic Monotheism* in 1860; see Bosch 2002, 109. This essay was frequently republished. He also popularised it in his *Chips from a German Workshop* (1867), xi, xviii, xix, 183 and 373. Finally, the most well-known book in which he used the term in his *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (1873), 16.

Hungarian Kingdom, but not as a denominational discipline like theology but objectively and impartially (Kovács, Ö. 1871). Five years later, he devised a plan for an educational curriculum detailing how the science of religion and theology could be taught (Kovács, Ö. 1876b: 15). This was developed into a book by 1884 (Kovács, Ö. 1884). Finally, in 1876, he wrote the first comprehensive handbook in the Hungarian language on comparative religion, offering a textbook for future courses on the science of religion (Kovács, Ö. 1876a, 1877).

It is Kovács's first initiative that I would like to explore here. His reflections on the nature and method of a science of religion provide us with materials for further discussion of the relationship between theology and the science of religion. Before turning our attention to his five articles, I wish to outline the contours of the theological environment to enable an apprehension of his special view of the science of religion. The article consists of three parts. First, it deals with the premise and context of the "new theology" proposed as an approach to the science of religion. Second, Ödön Kovács's concept of what the science of religion should be like is critically presented as it emerged from the discipline of theology. Third, some concluding thoughts will be presented about the issues raised in the second part of the study.

The Premise and Context of a New and Modern Study of Theology as a Science of Religion

The concepts of what could be regarded as facts for liberal theology differed profoundly from those of traditional theology. The role of Protestant liberal theology in Hungary exemplifies how a new trend within theology moved beyond the boundaries set by the church and created a "new theology," shifting towards the academic study of religion rather than remaining loyal to the old teachings of the church (Kovács, A 2010b: 75–102). The new theology was labelled "modern" theology by Dutch, German and, of course, Hungarian scholars, who were latently moving into a direction of thought employed by the science of religion due to the accommodation of the principles, methods, and findings of the history and philosophy of religion. This way of thinking moved beyond the traditional frameworks of Christian theology, leaving them behind. There was still, however, a degree of uncertainty in the liberal theological camp concerning whether modern theology wished in fact to cultivate theology, or sought to pursue the science of religion which was just being formed in the course of the nineteenth century. Some of the Hungarian, German, and Dutch liberal theologians exhibited a vast knowledge of scientific methodology and, while being regarded as liberal theologians, used a moderate tone or were inclined

towards mediatory theology (*Vermittlungstheologie*) (Hirsch 1954: 364–430).³ Scholars such as J. A. W. Neander, K. I. Nitzsch, and F. A. G. Tholuck endeavored in various ways to combine the traditional Protestantism of the Reformation Confessions with modern science, philosophy, and historical scholarship. This was also the case with the moderate liberals. The new school of thought of moderate, modern theology offered some excellent critiques of age-old Christian theology. They abandoned traditional doctrines of Christianity “as resting upon outdated or mistaken presuppositions” or “they were reinterpreted in a manner more conducive to the spirit of the age” (McGrath 1994: 93). The difference between moderate liberals — such as F. C. Baur — and radical liberal theologians — such as David Strauss — is that the latter often completely dismissed all doctrines of the old Christian faith and some even renounced Christianity (Barth 1972: 541).

The Hungarian case of liberal theology is also complex. The moderate and radical tones of liberal theology overlapped in the Hungarian Kingdom. Mór Ballagi, a professor of Hebrew and theology in Pest and regarded as the father of Hungarian liberal theology, clearly went to the very left end of the pendulum, being regarded as extreme by contemporaries in Hungary (Kovács, A 2010b: 105, 136). In other words, the neo-orthodox theologians argued that if one denied all the basic tenets of Christianity then why should the liberals remain in the church. As a counter argument, liberal theologians reasoned that they just wanted to renew the church and mold the discipline of theology into an academic subject which lived up to the expectations of the scientific discoveries of the nineteenth century. Ballagi was often criticized by the conservative theologians who insisted on the orthodox doctrines and claimed that the liberal theologians failed to face the very consequences of their own teachings. To this liberal circle belonged Albert Kovács, Ödön's elder brother and professor of Practical Theology and Canon Law, who taught at the Protestant Theological University in Budapest, as well as Gusztáv P. Nagy, professor of Dogmatics at Sárospatak Reformed College (Zoványi 1977: 336–37, 421). It was, however, Ödön Kovács, one of the most educated scholars of liberal theology, who took the time to reflect on the differences between theology and the science of religion, or more precisely on the nature of the “old theology,” and the nature of the new scientific theology, which he also named the “science of religion.” His aim was to replace traditional theology with the science of religion.

3 The name *Vermittlungstheologie* comes from a memorandum drawn up by F. Lücke in 1827. It was published in 1828 in the first issue of the *Theologische Studien und Kritiken*, the leading periodical of the movement. Among its other chief representatives were I. A. Dorner, R. Rothe, and H. L. Martensend.

It needs to be highlighted that he was indeed an exception to the rule in Hungary, since he not only pursued liberal theology, being both a historian of religion and a theologian, but also sought to grasp the frame of reference within which “modern” theology operated. However, his substantially scientific approach to the problematic issue of theology and the science of religion bears the marks of being shaped and formed by modern theology. One of the reasons for this is the fact that there had not yet been a generally accepted understanding of the new concepts and labels introduced by liberal theologians and other scholars of religion. Terminologies were fluid, to some extent, making space for misunderstandings or the failure to grasp the other’s point of view.

Another issue of concern when liberal theology encountered traditional theology was whether they were pursuing theology on the basis of a new and entirely different premise by applying new methods, or they had simply given up the basic methods and subject of theology and were instead heading off in completely new directions. The answer to this question, from liberals and orthodox theologians, depended on their stance. However, the main purpose of this article is to present how the new theology, named modern or liberal theology, perceived itself as a “science of religion” in Hungary. It will be suggested that Kovács’s arguments seem to be in line with those of C. P. Tiele. The Dutch scholar claimed that “theology and science of religion must not be practised separately and independently. The former will have become truly scientific only when it has enlarged its boundaries and has merged completely with the latter” (Tiele 1873: 39). To obtain an answer to the question of what the science of religion represented for Hungarian liberal theologians in the late nineteenth century, it is illuminating to examine Ödön Kovács’s publications. First, I will introduce what he meant by theology and by the science of religion. Then, I shall proceed to analyze his concept of the science of religion. Finally, I will describe the context in which his way of thinking is best placed and where it belongs, in order to understand his line of argument more comprehensively.

Ödön Kovács’s Concept of Science of Religion as a New Form of Theology

Peculiarly, Ödön Kovács distinguished between two different forms of theology. It may appear to some as being very simple: one is a traditional form, whereas the other is new, often labelled “modern” theology. However, in Kovács’s articles, modern or liberal theology was synonymous with the new and emerging

academic discipline, that is, the science of religion.⁴ This special view of the academic study of religion and/or theology will be presented. However, before presenting his thoughts, it is important briefly to examine his academic training.

After studying theology and philosophy at the Reformed Colleges of Marosvásárhely and Nagyenyed in Hungary, Kovács went on to gain further education at Utrecht University. Then, from October 1868 he continued at Leiden University (Antal 1995: 17–18). The theological faculty of that university was the leading center of “moderne theologie” (Roessingh 1914). Owing to his studies there, Kovács’ ideas became deeply imbued with the liberal theology of Leiden (Eglinton 2012: 13–18). At that time J. H. Scholten “taught New Testament, *theologia naturalis* (or *doctrina de deo*) and Dogmatic theology and was the architect and undisputed leader of ‘modern theology’, a new Leiden-based school of liberal theology that had been gaining popularity since 1848” (Platvoet 1998: 116). Scholten was influenced by the Tübingen historical-critical school headed by F. C. Baur, the leading center of liberal theology at that time. The new approaches and methods impacted the work and the thought of scholars teaching at various Western, Central, and Eastern European Protestant theological schools (Strohm 2007). During his stay in Leiden, Kovács developed a close friendship with Abraham Kuenen, who was probably better known abroad as a famous scholar of the Old Testament (Postma and Marjovszky 1997). Shortly after returning with a doctorate from the Netherlands in 1869, Kovács became a proponent of liberal theology. Having been influenced by Scholten and Kuenen, Kovács started to introduce the science of religion into Hungarian academic life of the modern study of religious traditions, on an impartial basis. As early as 1869, he wrote a series of five articles in the liberal *Protestant Scientific Review* (*Protestáns Tudományos Szemle*), a new periodical of the strong Hungarian Protestant liberal circles. In these articles, he tried to establish a ground for the study of the science of religion. In his first article, entitled “Theology and a New Worldview” (“A theológia és az új világnézet”), Kovács distinguished between a theological perception of the world informed

4 Platvoet speaks of “Tiele’s scientific theology” which was strongly resonant with what Ödön Kovács tried to do (see Platvoet 1998: 117–119). He cites the following opinion of Tiele: “I can hardly imagine a scientific theology of which the history of religions is not an important part” (Tiele 1860: 816), and “theology and science of religion must not be practised separately and independently. The former will have become truly scientific only when it has enlarged its boundaries and has merged completely with the latter” (Tiele 1873: 39; cited by Platvoet 1998: 116).

by the doctrines, and belief in Christian doctrines, which he saw as lethal for the religious morals and the new worldview of the brand of political, social, and scientific liberalism that exhibited a positive attitude to religion. He cited several sentences from the writings of various scholars such as John Stuart Mill,⁵ Thomas Henry T. Buckle (1884; cited in Kovács, Ö. 1869e: 6–7), and Robert J. Fruin (1866; quoted by Kovács, Ö. 1869b: 7). To bolster his view, he presented a kind of traditional theology, which he identified with Catholicism and Protestant orthodoxy. He saw a striking parallel between the infallible church envisaged by the Roman Catholic Church which “builds on the authority of a now probably infallible Pope” and Protestant theologians who referred in a similar manner to the “confessions and the Bible as a special revelation from God” (Kovács, Ö. 1869a: 178).⁶

In opposition to the conviction of traditional theology, Kovács believed that in all forms of religion, “the same religious Spirit reveals itself” (Kovács, Ö. 1869c: 210). Traditional theology scares modern man away from religion. Such a theology “suppresses a religious sentiment in the child of our age ... and places religion as a laughing stock and thing to be despised” (Kovács, Ö. 1869e: 5). Other Hungarian liberal scholars repeated the same argument: “Orthodoxy dispatches religious sentiment and depraves people’s morality” (Alföldi 1875: 46). By proving the inappropriateness of the enterprise of traditional theology and arguing that there is a place for religiosity for modern human beings in a liberal worldview, Kovács tried to lay the ground for doing a new form of theology, which is no longer theology in its old sense but a scientific theology; indeed, it is the new science of religion. Then he posed the question of what kind of form theology should take. Here, Kovács exhibited a worldview that was so common amongst liberals of his age who had a “message”; that is, their desire to work for the betterment of humankind. He strongly believed in progress and development. His perception of the new world was tied to the belief that human beings are innately good. This religious — in fact, theological — view was maintained by many of his Hungarian contemporaries (Kovács, A. 2010: 163).

In the second study, entitled “Theology and the Science of Religion” (“A teológia és a vallástudomány”), he states that there is another form of theology, which is “not afraid of the most meticulous and rigorous lancet” (Kovács, Ö. 1869a: 177). The leading figure of Hungarian liberal theology from Transylvania

5 Kovács quotes his writing without referring to its title, but there is enough detail to be able to identify to Stuart Mill’s article in the *Westminster Review* April, (1855); quoted by Kovács (1869b, 6).

6 The translations of the original sources in this article are by the author.

does not hide his aim, claiming that traditional theology has to be transformed in order to become a scientific discipline, that is, the science of religion (*val-lástudomány*) (Kovács, Ö. 1869a). Here, one can discern the same concern emphasized by Tiele. The “old theology” must merge with, and be changed into, a proper science of religion. He was convinced that this new scientific subject would have a place in the university. He reasoned that such a discipline could only be delivered in the lecture rooms of a secular university since its *object* falls within the sphere of scientific enquiry, and its method relies on empirical research. “One can expect only from such a discipline the purification of religious feelings and its proper guidance; as appropriate aesthetics purifies, guides the senses directed to beauty, while inappropriate principles corrupt and misguide them” (Kovács, Ö. 1869a: 178).

Lourens Bosch points out that Müller also had a liberal Christian message, arguing that the science of religion introduced into education could contribute to achieving a higher morality of people when the “Temple of Humanity” was built (Bosch 2002: 386–87). This is the key point of Kovács’s argument from which all other propositions stem. In his second article, he reasons that the object of traditional theology is God (Kovács, Ö. 1869a: 178; cf. Barth 1947: 30). Up to this point, both traditionalists and liberals agree but it also constitutes the crossroads of diverging opinions. Here, one finds a real signpost indicating markedly different opinions, since liberal theology clearly called for a profound change in the perception of reality. Ödön Kovács states that since God cannot be placed in the “sphere of learning and knowledge,”⁷ a question arises as to how theology is able to execute its work to “search for the truth” (Kovács, Ö. 1869a: 178). Since as science “through a struggle freed itself from the control of religion” and other sciences besides theology gained full liberty and recognition, it is theology that has to adapt to the new situation. In opposition to the traditional theology appearing in the orthodox Christian worldview stands the “real theology, which is not yet theo(logia) (*Theos logos*) but the science of religion” (Kovács, Ö. 1869a: 178). According to him, the subject of the science of religion is human beings themselves as religious beings, as well as religion itself.

The aim of the “new theology,” the science of religion, is to acquire knowledge about these concerns, and gain a deeper understanding of them. Here we encounter a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, Ödön Kovács had a dislike of the old theology and was unhappy with the word theology. He sought to remove it and coined a new term for the objective, academic, and empirical

7 It is obvious that here one speaks of “knowledge” as being immanent, and empirical. Therefore, the “knowledge” of faith is not “knowledge.”

study of religion and religious traditions, that is, the science of religion.⁸ On the other hand, he did use the word theology to denote the new academic discipline, but he added the adjectives “new,” “modern,” and “real” as attributes constituting the phrase “modern theology,” which he used for the same discipline, the science of religion. To show how complex the use of the term had become, we may draw attention to the fact that at the same time Kovács retained the term “theology” for labelling traditional orthodoxy. Therefore, he saw the critical study of the Bible as similar to other critical and empirical research executed in other emerging realms of science (academic disciplines) such as linguistics, archaeology, anthropology, and so on. This view was not unique to Kovács. With regard to the Dutch situation, Molendijk addresses the very same issue, pointing out that Kuenen’s scholarship can be understood as formulated from the perspective of the “science/history of religion” (Molendijk 2005: 18). I must add to this that nineteenth-century scholarship embraced scholars from a variety of new academic disciplines; therefore, it can be said to be all-inclusive (Molendijk 2005: 14–22). Cornelius P. Tiele, one of the founding fathers of the science of religion, was a liberal theologian, an Orientalist, a linguist, and a scholar of the science of religion at the very same time (Molendijk 2005: 77, 87, particularly 100).⁹ In fact, the newly coined terms “modern, or new theology” as well as the science of religion were interchangeable for many scholars of religion who arrived at the study of religion from the camp of Divinity (Platvoet 1998: 116–117).¹⁰

After making the aforementioned observations, Kovács proceeds to what the new academic discipline, a science of religion, intends to do. It will become clear to which degree this new academic discipline shifted away from the traditional ways of doing theology. To grasp the essence of his argument, it is crucial to bear in mind his context and personal beliefs. Kovács was a liberal theologian moving in the direction of becoming a historian of religion as well, but he had a heart for the church. He strongly believed in contributing to the betterment of society, more particularly the Protestant churches (Bucsay 1955: 48). His scholarly aim was not to destroy the structures of the church, or

8 Kovács uses both term “religion” and “forms of religion” referring to religious traditions of the world across time and space; see Ö. Kovács 1876a: 1877.

9 He points out that Tiele’s theological liberalism was different in many regards from Schleiermacher. Needless to say, there were various schools of thought of liberal theology, but the underpinning philosophical-theological argument was similar in all of them: “the Infinite dwells in you.”

10 Here, Platvoet superbly unveils the liberal theological stance of Tiele and describes Tiele’s evolving concept from scientific theology to science of religion.

undermine its mission and work in society, as orthodox opponents often portrayed the aims of liberals because of their rejection of doctrines, especially those referring to miracles. On the contrary, Kovács, just like many like-minded Hungarian liberals, earnestly believed in renewing the church and society through the recently discovered understanding of the Bible cleansed of its mythical façade, but maintaining its treasured moral content (Szász 1872: 49). With this attitude, he first sought to purify the church of dogma, and then, according to his interpretation, he wished to pursue real theology.

Second, he hoped to be objective by applying the empirical and historical methods of the emerging modern sciences. In so doing, his endeavor caused him to move away from the methods of old theology used until then, and bring in something radically new, enabling the old subject to become a secular, modern science.

In the opinion of Ödön Kovács, it is the task of “new theology,”¹¹ that is the science of religion, to acquire knowledge and comprehend the substance (Kovács, Ö. 1869a: 178) in similar ways to other disciplines. Human beings are able to comprehend only as much as “the entirety of nature and the world of mankind” unfold before them. He points out that a researcher employs scientific methods to examine, describe, classify and categorize the phenomena of the outer world, the path and laws of the forces of nature at work, and from such a pursuit, accurately portrays the evolution of the natural sciences. A historian similarly investigates the thousands of years of history and the development of humankind. Through the quest for understanding, the historian outlines the road of progress. In this way, historical studies come into existence. Philosophy also sees the phenomenon that humanity is religious, and that human beings are reasonable people, and through logic it tries to articulate laws which dictate the rules of human thinking.

Taking all former statements of Kovács into consideration, he contends that “the subject of every science falls into the sphere of experience” (Kovács, Ö. 1869a: 179). During the process of acquiring knowledge, a phenomenon may fall into either an empirical or intellectual sphere through which human beings attempt to get acquainted with and comprehend as well as to explain other phenomena. Basically, Kovács is arguing that a theology, if it wishes to become a science, must fully apply the methods of the natural and historical sciences. Therefore, the science of religion, or theology in the sense of “new, modern” seeks to know human beings as religious beings. “The subject of this science, like that of all other disciplines, falls into the sphere of empirical experience,

11 It is peculiar that the Hungarian theologian speaks of “theology of the science of religion” which I take as a synonym for the Dutch expression “scientific theology.”

and thus, into knowledge" (Kovács, Ö. 1869a: 180). Liberal theology propagates that it is possible to comprehend human religiosity/spirituality because the subject of religion is the human being. Kovács maintained

The phenomenon that man is a religious/spiritual being is an undeniable fact ... God and spirit may be negated, but to negate the fact that man believes in God and has properties named spiritual, would be just as mad as to deny that fire burns and light illuminates.

KOVÁCS, Ö. 1869A: 179¹²

Similarly, the liberal, Reformed theologian C. P. Tiele claimed that "man is religious by nature" (Platvoet 1998: 120). By making this statement, liberal or modern theology essentially shifts away from one of the basic premises of old theology that studied God, his dealings with human beings, and his revelation through the Bible as "theological language" articulated it. Therefore, liberal theology laid down a new theoretical basis, and began to install new methodological tools for the emerging science of religion, based on empirical research and the historical findings of linguistic, archeological, and material evidence.

In his third essay, entitled "The Science of Religion" ("Vallástudomány"), Kovács attacks even the very existence of theology — I may add, old theology — although in a highly surprising manner. He reasons that "theology cannot claim for itself the name of being a science because its subject (God) does not fall into the sphere of knowledge" (Kovács, Ö. 1869b). He corroborates his claim with further statements. Offering a survey of the subdisciplines of theology,¹³ he concludes: "it is only a small part which deals with God, himself," perhaps at the most, a certain part of dogmatical theology studies God that is "customarily named as theology in the strict sense" (Kovács, Ö. 1869b: 193). He maintained that "exegetical theology [as employed in Old and New Testament studies] teaches grammar or text" (193). When a scholar studies a religious text, he should not be regarded as a theologian just because this enterprise involves a text in which God is mentioned (193). He astutely argues that on such a basis any scholar doing an exegesis on a given text of a religious

12 Kovács repeats the same in his *A Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*: "man is by his very nature a religious being. Together with the very first manifestation of intellectual life man's religious needs awaken and this need searches for satisfaction" (Kovács, Ö. 1877: 180).

13 Many scholars of religion regard theology as a single entity, and so have a narrow view on what theology is, equating it only with systematic theology, the art of articulating doctrine. The aspect of ecclesiastical history, biblical theology, Old and New Testament studies with its linguistic, exegetical or history of religion biases are often neglected.

tradition, for instance a scholar of classical philology trying to interpret Hesiod or Homer, “may justly be called a theologian.” This may sound like a perplexing claim from a professor who was originally trained as a theologian, but we must bear in mind that Kovács was pioneering and shifting his stance and changing his allegiance from one subject to another. In his opinion, neither “historical, practical” nor “dogmatic theology, most of the time, deal with God.” “Parts of these disciplines belong to linguistics, others to general history and yet others to philosophy, aesthetics or poetry” (Kovács, Ö. 1869b: 193). Arriving from the modern scientific side, his penetrating liberal critique is summed up in a startling statement: traditional theology “in itself is not a science, but is a complex amalgamation of various pieces of knowledge, in which unity is seen only to the degree that one and the very same person studies them in order to receive a degree to be qualified for a certain job” (Kovács, Ö. 1869b: 195). This was an astonishingly sharp and witty reasoning for its time. However, at this point Kovács does not seem to arrive at the conclusion that the emerging and evolving sub-disciplines of theology based on historical criticism such as New Testament or Old Testament exegesis should be relocated to the Department of Hellenistic Literature, like Tiele reasoned (Platvoet 1998: 118). In the same article, Kovács treats separately a further, peculiar problem inherent in pursuing theology in the old-fashioned way. He highlighted that all traditional theology is denominational, that is, particular, and therefore, one cannot name such a theology as “a wise/learned science” (Kovács, Ö. 1869b: 195). A change has to happen. Contrary to the old theology, “modern” and “scientific” theology, which is equated with the science of religion, examines various phenomena within the religious history of humankind “from the beginning of time up until today,” which constitute the “forms of religion”¹⁴ such as Israelite religion, Christianity, Islam, Parsism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and so on. This constitutes

14 Scholars often say that the pioneer of morphological classifications was E. B. Tylor whose *Primitive Culture* (1871) is among the most influential books ever written in its field. It is interesting to see that Kovács already used the term *vallásalak* (form of religion) in 1869, four years before Tiele’s first article on the topic; see Tiele 1874a; see also Tiele 1874b, cited by Molendijk (2005: 154). By “form of religion,” Kovács meant religious traditions. The term was a tool of classification borrowed from biology and linguistics when speaking of morphology. Different forms/elements of religion were placed on an evolutionary scale from the primitive to the higher forms of religion and applied in the science of religion. The morphological classification of religions received a sophisticated explication from C. P. Tiele. His point of departure was a pair of distinctions made by the philosophers of religion Abraham Kuenen and W. D. Whitney. Tiele fully developed his thoughts only by 1896. See his Gifford Lectures entitled “Elements of the science of religion. I. Morphological II. Ontological.” The Gifford Lectures delivered before the University

the historical division which he also named as “historica theologia” of the science of religion. True scientific research is based on comparison relying on historical and empirical research (Müller 1882: 9, 26).¹⁵ Thus, Kovács presented a history of religion that was the essential part of the science of religion, the scientific theology he advocated (Platvoet 1998: 116).

After having acquired knowledge of various forms of religion, and after comparing and evaluating them, the science of religion tries to answer the question of what religion is (Kovács, Ö. 1876a: 380). In so doing, this science arrives at the philosophy of religion, which is the philosophical division of the science of religion. This is the second stage of the comparative science of religion. Here, Kovács perceives two possible results of such an investigation. First, if a philosophical inquiry leads to the realization that “religion is a spiritual need that cannot be rejected, the highest moral power of humanity, awakened to a spiritual life, then we would need to examine in which way this may be maintained, developed and, if necessary: purified and spread.” Second, “we may come to the conviction that religion is the false outgrowing and error of the human senses which only impedes free and natural development, then we would need to study how it were possible to cure humanity from this” (Kovács, Ö. 1869b: 195). In any case one cannot be indifferent to the result, as it would be a moral indifference, which is not acceptable. He concluded that this contributes to the “birth of the third element of science of religion,” the practical part.

Having set out the major framework of his theory in his fourth and fifth articles, entitled “A History of the Science of Religion and its Divisions” (“A vallástudomány története és részei I., II.”), Kovács explicated further that the true science of religion consisted of two major parts, the historical and the philosophical. The historical division of the science of religion is comprised of three subsections: the first deals with the emergence of various forms of religion, the second with its development and the third with its current state (Kovács, Ö. 1869d: 241).

Kovács highlighted how it is possible to borrow and apply exegesis from old theology (Kovács, Ö. 1869c). To deal with an original religious text is the first subsection of the historical division of the science of religion, which raises the question of how various forms of religion came into being. This first section is collated with some modification into exegetical and biblical theology (Kovács, Ö.

of Edinburgh in 1896, by C. P. Tiele, Theo. D., Litt.D. etc. These lectures were published as Tiele, 1897–1899.

15 See also Tiele 1866, 213, 216; and Tiele 1867. The work is cited by Platvoet (1998, 117). There, Tiele stated that comparison is “the foundation, the starting point, [and] the condition of all science.” Here Müller’s, and Tiele’s opinions are echoed to some degree.

1869d: 242). Here he offered an excellent critique of an opinion still held today by some classical philologists, that the science of religion is equal to a comparative history of religion based on a linguistic study of religious texts. Kovács succinctly argued that to possess the original languages is only a tool but not an end in itself. However, he underlined that it is useful to be able to read religious sources in the original language in order to reflect on the texts. Kovács, working in the second half of the nineteenth century, is aware of the impossibility of learning all languages since the science of religion was growing exponentially by integrating learning on new cultures, religions, and languages.

The second subsection of the history of religion is regarded as consisting of ecclesiastical and doctrinal history, which, apart from a scientific enterprise pursued in relation to Christianity, “extends its focus to the history of other churches and religions” (Kovács, Ö. 1869d: 241). No doubt Kovács relied on his own context. Since he was trained in theology and philosophy, he was most familiar with the teaching and history of Christianity. However, as a pioneer in the science of religion he strove to introduce a kind of comparative theology of religion and a phenomenology of religion based on history. One can only regret that he did not go into the details.

Finally, he contended that the science of religion must deal with the “current situation” of churches, that is, with Christianity as a religion, and other non-Christian religions. Kovács seems to be aware that at such a moment “history comes to the present, and the present has not yet got a history but it has a design” (Kovács, Ö. 1869d: 241). One of the names he used for this part of scientific enquiry is “current description” of religion. This is probably the closest to what we today call the sociology of religion. It may be unexpected that this constituted the third subsection of the history of religion for him. He underlined that such an enterprise was vital for the life of the Christian church.

Here one may easily spot Kovács speaking as a liberal theologian who is concerned about his church. The issues of “current description or design” are:

what kind of situation churches find themselves in, in terms of inner structures or outward context, what stage of development various forms of religion have arrived at, what are the shadowy and bright sides of today’s religious life?

KOVÁCS, Ö. 1869D: 242

He also called this scientific enquiry about religion “church statistics,” following Schleiermacher, and championed a science of religion that applies its results to the everyday life of people. His progressive thinking may be seen through the questions he poses:

how can a minister fulfil his practical obligations if he does not know where to make corrections, what he needs to improve, what he needs to work on? And how could he respond to these if he does not know the actual situation? How can a minister be a guide, a purifier, and developer, if he does not know what kind of religious views and needs his listeners have?

KOVÁCS, Ö. 1869D: 242

These critical questions have to be raised by every church and religious tradition. Regarding his own Hungarian context, he came to the conclusion that it is the “duty of church statistics” to provide us with such knowledge.

Having expounded what constitutes a proper pursuit of doing history of religion, he arrived at the second larger division of the science of religion, that is, the philosophy of religion. He was eager to underscore that a scholar of religion can deal with the philosophy of religion only after having studied the history of religions. In his opinion, finding answers to the questions raised by the philosophy of religion is only possible after acquiring empirical and historical knowledge about religion. This theoretical conviction is repeated in his magnum opus, *A Handbook of the Philosophy of Religion* (*A vallásbölcseészet kézikönyve*):

To deal with the history of religion we surely need to find a kind of acceptable system. Consequently, in order to speak about the history of religion, the classification of religions must precede it. Classification is possible in only two ways. Either it is done *a priori*, starting from a concept of the essence of religion, or *a posteriori*, according to the actual quality of different forms of religion. The understanding of the critiques of different classifications is possible only after learning about individual forms of religion. Therefore, the question of how to classify religion is postponed until the end of the first part.

KOVÁCS, Ö. 1876A: 25–26

Here he seemed to agree with J. H. Scholten and C. P. Tiele. Platvoet wrote about Tiele's view:

it is the task of mortal man to learn what is *a priori* (i.e., metaphysically) true, by studying [natural and historical] reality *a posteriori* (i.e., as it is empirically). Tiele believed that man could ascend from knowledge gained by empirical observation, to an understanding of the eternal laws by which the universe is held together.

PLATVOET 1998: 121. N. 50

Tiele, Müller, and Kovács all emphasized the priority of studying historical and empirical evidence.

In Kovács's opinion, it was not possible to imagine any study of religion without classifying and comparing religions (Kovács, Ö. 1869b: 195; cf. Müller 1882: 9, 26).¹⁶ To do so, he followed methods of linguistics, history, principal concepts of intellectual history, and theories of progress fashionable in his day. As a liberal scholar of religion, like many of today's academics, he fell into the same trap of claiming his own methodology as the absolute norm for studying religion: "We have dealt with the history of religions following a pattern of their coming into being and development. This is the only and *solely* proper method of a historical treatment" (Kovács, Ö. 1876a: 372, emphasis added). Then, the philosophy of religion formulates what religion is here; an "answer may be gained by the comparison of living religions." To Kovács, the philosophy of religion strives to determine in which form of religion the essence of religion is articulated and expressed most lucidly and perfectly. The first task of the philosophy of religion is to examine concepts about god. Second, it studies the worship of God including the relationship between God and human beings. Third, it investigates the ruling law and morals emerging out of their relationship (Kovács, Ö. 1869d: 243). Finally, the philosophy of religion deals with immortality, and examines, "criticises and explains concepts of eschatology" (Kovács, Ö. 1869d: 244).

Kovács states that one of the ultimate questions of the philosophy of religion is to probe into the origin of religion: whether it is "fantasy, instinct, feeling or sense," what is "the source for this remarkable phenomenon?" Is it general, is it the "outpouring of human intellect which influences man's temperament and life?" (Kovács, Ö. 1869d: 245).¹⁷ In his last article, Ödön Kovács explained how he perceived religion: "That it is an *influential power* undeniably conspicuous from sacrifices, which empowers, from the concussions it evokes, from the authority it exercised, from the struggle which it caused." (Kovács, Ö. 1869d: 245, italics in original) At the end of his reflection on modern theology, which is in

16 See Müller 1882: 9: "all higher knowledge is acquired by comparison, and rest on comparison."

17 Ödön Kovács wrote the following about the origins of religion: "it is not possible to categorise any forms of religions on the basis of any general principles or concepts analysed dialectically for establishing an *a priori* system, but it can only be done afterwards according to the actual quality of forms of religions, taking mainly into consideration what the categorisation *relates to*, that is the *form* [of religion]" (Kovács, Ö. 1876: 383). Like Müller, Kovács was also influenced by the German historical school, which underlined the significance of empirical facts for constituting the data for any scientific study. That is why Sharpe concluded that they "had a distrust of obvious *a priori* arguments" (Sharpe 1975: 31).

fact the proper science of religion, he came to the conclusion that it does not terminate with the investigations of history and philosophy of religion but that “theory must be applied in practice.” He argued:

If we examined religion, if its essence was grasped, its origin found, then we could learn from that how it is possible to rise, to strengthen it, and how to spread, purify and reform it. These are the issues with which the scholar of science of religion deals. Thus, the final step of doing modern theology is what he called as practical theology.

KOVÁCS, Ö. 1869D: 245

Kovács deemed it vital, after providing the reader with a theoretical foundation on the science of religion, to put it into practice. The very end of the study of the science of religion should lead to its practical application. Therefore, for him, in this peculiar sense, the applied form of the science of religion is “practical theology.” He maintained first that “all rhetoric is the same, but the question, of how to preach in order to exert the most lasting and deepest religious influence, belongs to the science of religion” (Kovács, Ö. 1869d: 245). Here the liberal Hungarian theologian accentuated the modern theological aspect of a discipline studied as a science of religion. He believed that religion manifests itself in life and science, and is cultivated for the betterment of people’s lives. Kovács seemed to have a very positive view of religion, especially the ethical aspect of religions in general which he thought could teach human beings to become better people. Second, he continued in this vein: “the science of religion does not discuss pedagogy, and does not form new principles of education but it has to *speak about the* form of religious education” (Kovács, Ö. 1869d: 245). Arts and literature do not belong within the scope of the science of religion (modern theology), but its applied form, practical theology, may use these subjects when preaching to stir religious fervor. Thus, religious education of the masses was a “missionary program” for Kovács. This entailed a “mission” to elevate up to a higher form of religion people either at home (Christian Europe) or abroad (non-Christian nations) standing on a lower level of spirituality. This had to be done by acknowledging an underlying unity of religion and by appreciating lower forms of religion. Moreover, one had to find “points of contact” and stepping stones to lead them to a higher form of religion. Therefore, the intention of practical theology is “not to destroy as missionaries do but to reform” (Platvoet 1998: 121).¹⁸ Bosch clearly pointed out that this was Müller’s “mission” as a scholar too (Bosch 2002: 380).

¹⁸ There seem to be a similarity here to the thoughts of C. P. Tiele. Platvoet wrote: “Tiele viewed Practical Theology as the applied science of Science of Religion. It was to reflect

After Kovács had managed to explicate why the science of religion needed to be applied and put into practice, and proved that science of religion has the right to bear the name of science, since it is “one of the supplementary parts of human knowledge” (Kovács, Ö. 1869d: 245), he argued that it had a place in education at universities. Kovács, like Müller and Tiele, found it unacceptable to teach theology from a denominational aspect at a university, which would be a “sin against the concept of university, and an offence to other denominations” (Kovács, Ö. 1869d: 245). For him, theology in such an academic situation was equal to the science of religion, as we have seen. From this liberal thinking arises the concept of the value-free research of religion stressed today, which firmly seeks to separate theology (Christian or any other religious traditions) and the science of religion from each another (Cox 2010; see also Wiebe 1999). However, as Platvoet also indicated in his article, for many liberal theologians, modern theology and the science of religion existed side by side as “close harmonies,” or were regarded as two sides of the same coin (Platvoet 1998: 122 n.53).¹⁹

Taking into consideration the historical context of his time, Ödön Kovács held exceptionally progressive views. Besides Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and Aramaic, as a linguist he read in Dutch, German, English, and French. Scholars from those countries were his “mentors” from whom he learned about modern scientific methods and the theories of his age. The most significant impact on forming his liberal ideas was the “moderne theologie” of Leiden.²⁰ He drew not only on the views of his teachers and friends, but also tried to develop them further in his own special way (Kovács, A. 2010a). He was part of the climate of liberal scholars such as J. H. Scholten, Abraham Kuenen, F. C. Baur, and others, whose efforts rewrote what theology had been. The liberal school of theology produced such excellent scholars of religion as William Robertson Smith of Scotland, and Cornelius P. Tiele of the Netherlands, to mention two who held similar views to those of Ödön Kovács.

on how the body of theory developed by the Science of Religion could be used to reform and nurture the religion of Christians, through preaching and religious education, and on how these could be applied to the propagation of Christianity through mission. The aim of mission must, however, not be to eradicate other religions but to rather reform and refine them” (Platvoet 1998, citing Tiele 1866: 212–215, 242; 1867: 51–52).

19 Here he quoted Roessingh's view on the dogmatic theology of J. H. Scholten (see Roessingh 1924, 294).

20 Platvoet wrote: “In Tiele's Christianity, however, there was no room for the divinity of the Christ, but only for the historical Jesus of Nazareth who had taught men to adore God in spirit and truth. Tiele was not alone in rejecting the divinity of the Christ. J. H. Scholten and a few other ‘modern’ Dutch theologians had also taken this ‘anti-supranaturalist position in the 1860s” (Platvoet 1998: 142).

Strange Siblings? Concluding Thoughts on the Premises and Methods of Science of Religion and Traditional Theology

Hungarian liberal theology, just like its German and Dutch liberal counterparts, did not think that the task of the church was to preach about Christ's redemption. Rather, to them Jesus was a man, who realized the highest ethical religion, which they saw as a pinnacle for all religion. Kovács, together with many European liberal Christians, shared these views (Platvoet 1998: 118).²¹ Similarly, C. P. Tiele wrote: "Christianity meets the religious needs of the human heart better than any other religion and is therefore destined to become the religion of humanity" (Tiele, cited in Roessingh 1924: 359–360). Kovács charged traditional theology with "lopsidedness, theological speculation and ignorance about other 'forms of religion'" (Kovács, Ö. 1869c: 210–211).²² Neither Kovács, Baur, Kuenen nor Tiele believed in the theological doctrine of special revelation. Hungarian liberal theology, like similar movements in Western Europe, introduced a "new worldview," which raised many excellent questions about religion. For them, theology could not remain the same theology any longer, as we have seen here in the articles presented by Ödön Kovács. We saw how Kovács grappled with articulating his thoughts and managed to present his understanding of the science of religion, which showed striking similarities to the Dutch school.

The "new theology," that is, the science of religion as described by Ödön Kovács in a Tiele-like manner, sought in the first place to answer questions posed by science, historical investigations, and empirical methods, by relegating Christian faith to the second place. The human mind was to judge faith, belief, and what is or is not religious.

It was a significant development within theology to shift its focus and start to transform itself into a science of religion. It tried to find its own identity as a new academic discipline among other disciplines such as sociology, psychology, pedagogy, history, and philosophy. However, many of the philosophical

21 Platvoet highlighted that "Tiele's final stage was their [religions] 'physiological' and 'psychological' study in order to establish that faith and adoration constituted the innermost core of all religions, and that it was a fact of history that Christianity possessed these two in their highest form" (Platvoet 1998: 118). Platvoet quoted Tiele's two writings 1866: 241–242; 1867: 44–48, 51.

22 See Molendijk 2005: 101 n.80. Here Molendijk underscores three elements raised by Tiele in his article on page 214 as hindrance to the study of science of religion: "narrow-mindedness, lack of knowledge of the so-called pagan religion and the "prevailing speculative method." It is very likely that Kovács was well acquainted with C. P. Tiele's article (1866).

premises underlying the argument of Kovács, Tiele, and even liberal Christians like Müller were very similar to the thinkers of the Patristic period (Bosch 2002: 461). Ödön Kovács's approach to the science of religion shows how liberals endeavored to achieve an objective and scientific view of religion. It was demonstrated that Kovács kept the word theology but gave it a new content. One could say that he coined a new term, the science of religion, for modern theology, which still converged with traditional theology in that it maintained a form of Christian faith. The new, scientific theology maintained a belief in the superiority of Christianity due to the "ethical teaching of Jesus" as Müller and Tiele believed it. In this sense, all religions implicitly include something of the most developed form of religion, Christianity. However, modern liberal theology also diverged from traditional theology since its premises, presuppositions, research questions, and methods were often very different from orthodox theology: for the science of religion, the norm for all research was rationale; for the old theology, it was *fides* to the orthodox. Kovács's scholarly endeavor shows that he inhabited two worlds (liberal theology and the science of religion) at the same time, like his Dutch colleagues. This phenomenon was tellingly labelled "close harmonies" by Platvoet.

Kovács's use of terminology and the meanings of words such as *vallástudomány* (the science of religion), were sometimes clear and at other times as elusive as Tiele's; yet after decoding them it became clear that Kovács's science of religion concept had a liberal theological bent. It became especially obvious when he wrote on the applied form of the science of religion as a "practical theology." In nineteenth-century Hungary, both schools of theology used the word science, but in a different manner. Each tried to present theology to academia as a proper science. In this endeavor, both were in the same boat. Protestant liberal theology emerged out of this debate as a pioneer and proponent of the science of religion, but it often struggled with where to position itself on the borderline of theology and religious studies. The issue of self-identification raises profound questions for the relation between theology and the science of religion even today, which could touch upon the nature of not only the relation of Christian, but also Hindu or Muslim, theologies and the study of religion. However, this leads us to investigate new topics outside the aims of this article. A science of religion-orientated theology, that is, "modern theology," laying an unequivocal emphasis on humankind and human religiosity, developed methods that established the foundation for the modern study of religion. The prime aim of researchers is not to conform to the inner, traditional views of a given religion but to treat the sources equally, by applying empirical and historical methodologies and enforcing perspectives outside the religious tradition being studied. Owing to this endeavor of Protestant liberal theology,

a new comparative study of religion came into being, which was mostly historical, philosophical, phenomenological, and linguistic in its orientation. The similarities between liberal theology and the emerging science of religion described in this article clearly mark historical points of convergence between the two subject areas, yet it is also vital to register the points of departure, the differences which may function as signposts to remind us constantly of the difference between theology of any religious tradition and the science of religion.

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