

*Thematic Article*



## **The Ways and Characteristics of Adults' Religious Learning in Eastern Hungary**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to describe religious instruction for adults. This study emphasizes the central role of these groups in non-formal education, and tries to determine the main characteristics of people who are involved, besides, to describe the most common didactic models. Data were collected in an Eastern Hungarian city, where all the concerned denominations, the Roman and Greek Catholic, Reformed and Baptist churches are represented. As the former scholarly activity was quite poor in this field, and the ongoing research is still at its beginning stage, some hypotheses need further confirmation.

**Keywords:** religious education, adult learning, motivation, mobility, didactic, self-education

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## **Antecedents**

Before the political changes in 1990 the activities of adult communities had been restricted by the state. Since belonging to any denomination was unwanted by the former regime, generations grew up with no religious education. Likewise the other stages of the Hungarian society, religious public life changed dramatically in the early 90s. The so called "historical churches" recognized that due to the growing number of brand new denominations, they have to find the way to people whose religious education had been finished in their adolescent years, if they had had any. The biggest protestant denomination's council stated that teaching is an important part of the church's mission, life and service.

The Catholic church – likewise the leading protestants – according to the Second Vatican Council's efforts, organized the network of communities for the religious education of adults. The General Directory for Catechesis distinguishes three types of adults as subjects of religious education (GDF, 172): non-baptized adults; those who had been baptized, but have not been sufficiently educated; and adult Christians, who live their faith consistently, but desire to deepen it. Even though the accuracy of GDF's typology had not been proved by sociological methods, in our sample we can find all of these kinds of believers, but the domination of the last type can be observed. In the past two decades these communities have become one of the most important stages of adult education throughout the country.

In spite of the importance of the topic, too little attention has been paid to these communities. There has been a research project conducted by László Dobos with the aim of finding the most effective didactics to involve more adults (Dobos, 1999). Ferenc Tomka, besides, often emphasizes the importance of adequate adult education in church environment (Tomka, 1991; 1997). His brother, the sociologist Miklós Tomka has also investigated the issue in several publications (e.g. Tomka, 1988; 1991; 1996; 1998; 2010). In his sociographic study, Kamarás describes parish educational communities without hiding the system's deficiencies (Kamarás, 2003). In Reformed Church one significant survey research project was done in 2006, which attempted to compare scholarly literary background with actual practice (Hodossi, 2008). These scholars have taken efforts to examine how religious educational network is functioning. Beside these most notable issues, many other publications are known, the aim of which is to ascertain how adults' religious instruction should work, instead of how it does actually (e.g. Keszeli, 2006; Lukács, 2010; Tarjányi, 1998; 1999a; 1999b).

We intend to investigate this phenomenon from the point of view of educational sociology as well as didactics. In the ongoing process of our research, we try to emphasize the role of these groups in the system of adult education. The aim of this paper is to determine the characteristic features of the participants, particularly the motivation of their attendance, and briefly expound the most common didactical models.

## **Methodology of the empirical analysis**

Because of the distribution of the population, religious adult education is typically an urban occurrence, for our empirical research we have chosen Debrecen, one of the main Eastern Hungarian cities. Debrecen is situated in the middle of a multiconfessional region, where all of the denominations involved in the work exist. These are the Roman and Greek Catholic, the Calvinist and the Baptist churches. A survey of 61 variables has been edited. By random sampling, we have selected three Roman Catholic, and three Calvinist congregations, and visited the only Baptist community and the only Greek Catholic parish. One parson refused our request, thus seven groups remained. According to the information gained from the pastors, we estimated the whole population to be about 525 persons. After a period of three weeks, we collected 201 completed surveys. Of different reasons some people have been left out, most of whom were out of the focus of the research due to their age. Finally we recorded a sample of 166, which exceeded 30% of the examined population. Even though the rate of willingness to respond was quite good, we do not know much about those who refused our request. The lack of representativeness should refrain us from precipitant statements about the whole population. In analyzing some indicators of religiosity, we considered Medián Public Opinion and Market Research Institute's representative research's results as a base. Data management and analysis was performed using SPSS 17.0.

## **Hypotheses**

In other research projects the domination of young adults and elder people was observed in non-formal education. (e.g. Gegenfurtner & Varuas, 2012) After graduation young people around the age of twenty-five pay more attention to founding a family or building a career. We supposed that due to the nature of these groups the lack of middle-aged group members is not detected. Even if there is a decrease in these age groups, group members return to their communities soon after childbirth.

In accordance with the motivation for participation in religious education as an adult, we can separate two main reasons. Some of the group members focus on learning and gaining more information and knowledge about their own confession. The other well-defined part of the attendants appreciates belonging to a community and benefit from the interpersonal relationships they can build within the groups. We supposed that people from the first type practice individual religious activities more often than the others. It is important to note that social capital is a 'by-product' of these groups, and not the goal thereof. In contrast with Bourdieu's and Coleman's theories (Bourdieu, 1978; Coleman, 1988), even if some members use these relationships consciously in secular life, strengthening social status is not among the main purposes of participation.

According to our second hypothesis religious socialization and religious attitudes of parents as well as their social status and the grade of education can have an effect on someone's motivation.

We suppose that the members of the communities belong to at least two different types, regarding their religiosity. The majority is religious according to the teachings of the church, but a significant part define themselves as religious in their own way, even if they say they belong to the church. We thought that the type of religiosity can have an influence on someone's motivation and self education.

### **Religious socialization and inter-generational mobility**

After analyzing the surveys, we found that the gender division of our sample was quite balanced, with slight female domination. These data are resemble the findings of the European Value Survey (EVS), which pointed out that women are more often involved in religious activities than men in European countries. In Hungary women's domination in most religious categories is stronger than we could conclude from their participation in religious adult educational communities.

It is even more interesting if we have a look at the distribution of participants' age. If we focus on any indicators of religiosity, we find that the frequency of irreligiousness is higher in younger cohorts than among older people. On the other hand, due to the above mentioned political reasons, the majority of Hungarians around fifty have had no religious education at all. As Tomka says, from many aspects the Kádár-regime's generation is the least religious in Hungarian society (Tomka, 2010). Thanks to EVS it is easy to follow the changes in religiosity among the members of each generation. If we compare the religiosity of different cohorts, we find that the level thereof is increasing. Older people are more religious today than they were ten years ago. This is called the age-effect that can reduce the cohort-effect (Rosta, 2007). These confusing facts are good reasons to analyze our sample by the age of group members. If we do so, we find that in our sample the youngest generation is the least active (27.2%), but the oldest cohort is not more involved than the middle-aged adults (both are 36.4%). It means that in spite of the challenges the middle-aged people must be facing in work and family life, they have a solid engagement in religious activities. This fact is remarkable, because in these decades, even the private interpersonal relationships very often weaken. Acknowledging the truth of Tomka's statement, we can tell that even in the least religious generations, there is a core which is very active. It can be explained with the observation that the influence of the family is stronger than the influence of the political atmosphere. This is consistent with previous results which described the religiosity of the parents of the denominational high school pupils (Pusztai, 2005).

To verify this claim we can compare the religiosity of group members with the religiosity of their parents. Since the attendants' religious attitudes are more similar to the mother's attitudes than to the father's, we can ascertain that the female parent have a greater impact on someone's religiosity. The proportion of the immobiles are over 63%, and an additional 20 percent's mother was also religious in her own way. Only in the category of "without religious commitment" can we observe a significant difference, where the occurrence of the fathers is double of the mothers. (9.8% and 20.4%)

Examining the members' childhood upbringing from a religious point of view, we find that the religious dominance can be observed in every cohort. 72.4% of the whole sample said that they were raised in a religious manner. Only one fifth of the population said a categorical "no", and 7.4% couldn't decide. This tendency is stronger among youngsters. While in Youth 2000 research we find that only one third of the youth received religious upbringing (Rosta, 2002), in our sample this rate was 77.3%, and an additional 15.9% were raised according to some kind of religious standards. These data make clear that religious upbringing increases the chance of participation in the communities studied. Analyzing our sample by cohorts, we cannot find remarkable differences. We can conclude from this fact that family socialization is stronger than age-effect.

Table 1. Religious upbringing's impact on religiosity

| Type of religiosity                     | Received religious upbringing |         |              |
|---|-------------------------------|---------|--------------|
|   | Yes                           | No      | Can't decide |
| Religious according to church teachings | 76.3%                         | 60.6%   | (8.3%)       |
| Religious on his own way                | 22.9%                         | (21.2%) | (66.7%)      |
| Can't decide                            | (0.8%)                        | (15.2%) | (16.7%)      |
| Not religious                           | (0%)                          | (3%)    | (8.3%)       |
| Total                                   | 118                           | 33      | 12           |
|   | 100%                          | 100%    | 100%         |

Source: own chart ( $p < 0.01$ )

We may conclude that in spite of the permanent changing of the Hungarian society's religiosity, the majority of the people observed are fairly homogeneous according to some indicators. If we want to define the differences between generations it is worth checking some less subjective and more comprehensive variables. In our survey we focused on nine possible activities that the members might have practiced as a child, as these are considered to be important divisions of early religious socialization. Some of these are individual pursuits, and some need denominational background. These were combined into one variable, which resulted in an output from 0 to 9. From these data it can be gathered that members have had a solid religious commitment. In our sample the mean of these activities was 3.65 with a standard deviation of 2,405. If we compare cohorts, we find that this mean is significantly higher among the members of the youngest generation. It does not necessarily mean that they are more committed than older attendants were at this age. Simply the adults who grew up after the political transformation had more possibilities to take part in common activities. However, in the percentage of attendance at church services, there is less than one percent difference between generations. This confirms the hypothesis that from the 1960-70s in Hungary, since cooperative church leaders have been delegated by the State Office for Church Affairs (ÁEH), instead of the open religious persecution, disguised antipathy dominated (Hegedűs, 2000).

Table 2. Means of individual and common religious activities in childhood

| Cohorts  |      | Private religious activities | Common religious activities |
|----------|------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Under 25 | Mean | 2.0682                       | 2.4318                      |
|          | N=   | 44                           | 44                          |
| 26-50    | Mean | 1.9831                       | 1.6102                      |
|          | N=   | 59                           | 59                          |
| 51+      | Mean | 1.9483                       | 1.2069                      |
|          | N=   | 58                           | 58                          |

Source: own chart

An important potential indicator of changing OF the climate is that the majority of young group members participated in organized religious education at school (81.8%), while this rate is 37.3% and 43.1% in the older population (without the Baptists, this rate is higher). But the last numbers are also extremely high, if we compare them to a former study's outcome. In 1985 the rate of baptized Catholic students who received religious education at school, nowhere exceeded the twenty percent (Tomka, 1988). These data indicate that many of the people involved in these communities as adults were committed to their faith since their childhood, despite of the difficulties of the time.

If we summarize the characteristics of adult group members according to their childhood religious education, we can discern some specifics. The majority of these people grew up in a basically religious family and they had a religious upbringing. For most of them denominational community is a natural environment, and living their faith is not limited to attending Sunday church services since their childhood. It is a controversial issue whether social environment or narrower milieu has stronger impact on someone's religiosity (Pusztai, 2004). If we focus on the people who take part in adult religious education it is easy to respond to the questions. Committed parents and close family members can offset the negative social processes.

### **Motivations for participation**

When we are looking for the main reasons why adults participate in educational communities, we can not ignore religion's role among the factors which can shape individuals' subjective well-being. Some scholars emphasize the importance of social networks as the key source of well-being, while others underline the subjective, private aspects of religiosity. As Lin and Putnam point out, while both approaches are plausible, it is still difficult to decide which aspect of religion plays a more significant role (Lin & Putnam, 2010). This most likely depends on a person's characteristics. Concerning the rational choice theory (Iannaccone, 1992), we can reckon that these classes are attended by people who try to provide their spiritual well-being from resources they gain from their interpersonal relationships. This statement is based on the fact that these are the benefits that can hardly be gained otherwise. Of course in our sample the boundary line is not that clear, because in most cases types of motivations all – strongly or weakly – exist at the same time.

In the questionnaire we included several questions about motivations. We applied a Likert scale to measure the importance of different variables in the fulfillment of group members' faith. We found that some variables' effect was quite insignificant among some particular denominations (e.g. protestants consequently underestimate the importance of pilgrimage). After removing these confusing data, two new variables have been formed by splitting the remaining items. In the first one we collected the individual activities which take effect on senses (such as holy music, churches, liturgy etc.) and in the second one the community-related activities. After comparing data we found that 67.1% of the population valued common experiences higher. It is hard to tell whether it results from the desire to deepen religious interpersonal relationships or from the intension to develop the cognitive nature of someone's own religiosity. However, the fact that there is no correlation between the level of education and preferences contradicts the second option. However, we could suppose that highly qualified persons require more knowledge at every stage of life. On the other hand, if we specifically take the importance of knowledge, the correlation between qualification and rate of importance is obvious.

Table 3. Importance of religious knowledge regarding to educational level

|                  | Not important | Hardly important | Moderately important | Quite important | Very important |
|------------------|---------------|------------------|----------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| Elementary       | (50%)         | (37.5%)          | (31.6%)              | 26.7%           | 12.4%          |
| Secondary        | (0%)          | (25%)            | (26.3%)              | 28.9%           | 29.2%          |
| Higher education | (50%)         | (37.5%)          | (42.1%)              | 44.4%           | 58.4%          |
| Total            | 2             | 8                | 19                   | 45              | 89             |
|                  | 100%          | 100%             | 100%                 | 100%            | 100%           |

Source: own chart, (detected correlations were not significant)

If we make a division in accordance with religiosity, the output is clearer. The majority of community members who are religious according to the teachings of the church (73.5%) emphasized the role of communities, while this rate was only 55% among THOSE religious in their own way. For the sake of objectivity it must be added, that every variable got a higher score from more committed members. The conclusion of these facts is that members who are not religious regarding to church's teaching are not typical believers without belonging (Davie, 2007), but they are less engaged in every aspects of religiosity. If we separate the secular and religious motivating factors we can assess that spiritual fruits are more attractive for the most religious range, while less engaged group members wish to spend their time with like-minded people.

After analyzing the item-line with factor analysis, three types are outlined. The first one can be named „community seekers” as it has been revealed in former studies (Pusztai, 2008). They want to build quality relationships and try to benefit from these acquaintances in connection with secular-based problem solving as well. For them common religious activities are important sources of social capital. With the appearance of market economy the solidarity network has been shrunk. Many group members of this type try to replace the lost former relationships, based on the principle of

reciprocity (Utasi, 2002; 2008). Though interpersonal relationships are not very strong among attendants they can also benefit from the strength of weak ties (Granovetter, 1973).

„Consequentialists” find that participation is a source of knowledge. Their main goal is not factual material itself, but the blessings can be received by means of it. They are the most engaged people with solid Christian family background so their intergenerational religious mobility is the weakest. A significant proportion of these people believe that the denominational manner of religiosity is the only way to salvation.

The last type, the deeply embedded members include persons who appreciate family traditions, and want to meet friends’ and relatives’ expectations. They can be described as cultural Christians, who consider their religion as an important segment of identity. For these people, participation in religious education is a proper way to save their roots.

### **Participation and self-education**

A significant part of the group members practice leisure activities which include religious self-education. We considered possessing an own copy of the Bible a necessary condition. We found that all of the participants have a Scripture in their home, but there are differences in the frequency of reading it. The most significant independent variables which influence the commonness of studying the Bible were age and belonging to denominations. We can conclude that with aging the frequency of reading increases. Since in the case of other indicators this tendency can not be detected, we explain these data with the older generations’ more free time. This contradicts the fact that expansion is detected between the youngest and middle-aged cohorts as well, although we can hardly imagine that people in their twenties are busier than their parents’ generation.

If we analyze Bible study habits by denominations, we observe that Baptists are the most engaged in Scripture reading, followed by the Calvinists. This is not surprising, if we know that in Baptist congregations the religious education is focused on the study of holy texts, but this effect was also detected among the Reformed church’s believers. In protestant denominations the ‘sola scriptura’ principle is an important part of the doctrines. On the other hand in Catholic churches the importance of the holy tradition is equivalent.

If this question is approached from the former educational level, we can examine whether participants with higher graduation are more often willing to educate themselves. If we check the crosstabulation of Bible reading habits and the level of education, we conclude that there is no correlation between these variables. Group members with secondary school graduation study the Scripture more frequently than others with higher education. The situation is more complex if we replace the Bible with other religious literature and church issues. In this crosstabulation we find that highly educated persons read this kind of books and magazines most often. The conclusion of



these facts is that even if studying holy texts and reading church issues are both tools of religious self-education, the individual's religious attitudes have a greater impact on the first, while the second rather depends on someone's general reading habits. This statement can be confirmed if we compare the frequency of reading church materials with the number of books a member has read in a year. 64.7% of those who never read denominational papers or home pages have not read a book within the last twelve months, while those who read these issues daily, read more than ten books per year. It is not easy to decide which one is the cause and which one is the effect, however, the context is clearly set.

Table 4. Correlation between reading church materials and general reading habits

| Do you read church issues? | How many books have you read last year |        |         |              |
|----------------------------|--|--------|---------|--------------|
|                            | 0                                      | 1 to 5 | 6 to 10 | more than 10 |
| Never                      | 64.7%                                  | 15.6%  | (5.9%)  | (0%)         |
| Once-twice per month       | (35.3%)                                | 33.8%  | 35.3%   | (19.4%)      |
| Weekly                     | (0%)                                   | 15.6%  | (17.6%) | 27.8%        |
| More often                 | (0%)                                   | 18.2%  | (20.6%) | (16.7%)      |
| Daily                      | (0%)                                   | 16.9%  | (20.6%) | 36.1%        |
| Total                      | 17                                     | 77     | 34      | 36           |
|                            | 100%                                   | 100%   | 100%    | 100%         |

Source: own chart ( $p < 0.01$ )

Another important independent variable which that has a strong impact on religious self-education is the type of the individual's religiosity. At the beginning of our research we assumed that all members who are involved in a form of church-based religious education belong to the society's most religious layer. Our survey denied this hypothesis. The rate of group members who defined themselves as religious in their own way or could not decide exceeded 30%. In spite of this fact only three persons said that they did not belong to any denominations. It seems that for them participating in religious education is an alternative of parochial practices, not an addition. Although we can ascertain that these people are less committed than others who follow the church's doctrines, it is useful to analyze their self-educational attitudes. Whereas these members read church publications less frequently than others, 61.9% of them occasionally read church publications, 16.7% weekly or more often. Bible reading was considered as another indicator of self-education. There was not any person among the surveyed sample who never read the Scripture. Everybody claimed that they read the Bible at least monthly. These data are notable because 40% of the non-denominationally religious members attend church services more rarely than monthly.

### Applied methods for religious instruction

As we can conclude from the empirical data, the community members are not making up a homogeneous mass. To maintain their permanent interest catechists should find the proper way of teaching in harmony with the learners' requests. The main difficulty is that in the priest-training process pedagogical and didactic education is insufficient.

This fact can respond to the question why catechists (clergymen or laymen) apply inadequate methods in teaching. In accordance with Dingemans' typology the 'offering' method is most common in religious educational communities (Dingemans, 2001). This model is very close to formal education, it requests well-educated instructors and motivated students. This model is well applicable in formal education where the community of students is quite homogeneous, regarding to THEIR main specifics. (eg. age, education etc.) This is still the most widely spread method in religious instruction, while in some communities it barely meets members' needs. It cannot be ignored that within the oldest cohort, 57.6% of the members has a college or university degree. This rate among the middle-aged population is extremely high, 79.7%, and due to the expansion of higher education, we can expect further increment in the youngest cohort. The other notable fact is that 21.7 % are employed in leading positions and the additional 65.2% are intellectual workers. It might be concluded from these data that the majority of community members are able to form an independent opinion and instead of a teacher they rather need a mediator who is a partner in thinking together. Recognizing this claim the 'dialogue model' (Dingemans, 2001) has gained ground in several communities. In these groups it is the instructors' responsibility to structure the conversation by asking questions or by the deduction of conclusions. If we compare the statement 'instructor takes me as an equal partner' to 'instructor is carefully prepared', we find that there are still things to be regarding this issue. While 71.1% strongly agree with the latter contention, this rate is only 58.8% in relation to the former statement. It is especially alerting that every twentieth community member is not able to find any partnership with the instructor. It is notable that on other stages of adult education, learners ranked this first among demotivating effects.

There are differences between denominations too, but we can identify the tendency that with aging the situation is improving. These data might be explained by the shrinking of the age gap between the instructors and those instructed.

The third possible model which is rarely applied in Hungary is the 'exploring' method. This stimulates the independent, problem-solving learning. The instructor's role is to define the aims of process and the community members can choose the parts of curriculum most useful for them.

## **Conclusions**

With more than two decades after the political changes the weakness of civil society is still a serious problem in Hungary. Due to the lack of small communities religious educational groups have a central role in non-formal education, which is far beyond religious dimensions. Apart from many other organizations each generation is represented in these groups. As we pointed out, even young adults are involved in these activities, although in the middle cohort the dominance of childless persons could be observed.

It is easy to see the childhood impulses' impact on participation. Though the communities are open for everybody, the majority of active members are religiously immobile from the aspect of religious intergenerational mobility.

As a summary we can state that our hypotheses can be confirmed concerning the motivations and religiosity. In the instruction, beside the most religious layer of society, a minority of people is also present, who do not live their lives in tune of the church's doctrines, and their activity is quite casual. They are moderately motivated in religious self-education or deepening in liturgy, but they form an existing part of the communities. As they are less committed, and more critical, their presence can be inspirational for the majority. In their motivation for participation, the human factor is more relevant than seeking eternal values.

This research helped to highlight the relevant issues that need to be investigated, concerning these congregations, and set further hypotheses which must be confirmed in the future. The most important consequence of this empirical study is that – to paraphrase the parables of the sower – even though we know how to sow and have impressive knowledge about seeds, if we do not gain information about the soil, the procedures of religious instruction will be hardly effective.

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