

The Evolution of Higher Religious Education in Türkiye: Historical Continuities, Contemporary Challenges, and Prospects for Reform

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Higher religious education in Türkiye has developed along a complex historical path, beginning with the *Suffa* and madrasas and later becoming institutionalized within Faculties of Theology. Across these stages, the mission has remained the preservation of Islamic knowledge, moral guidance, and cultural continuity. Despite repeated reforms, many structural and curricular problems identified in earlier eras persist. This study seeks to examine the historical evolution of higher religious education and identify its persistent structural deficiencies on Türkiye's transformation. The study uses comparative historical document analysis to examine key reform texts, including reports by Ali Fuat Başgil and Hamidullah (1969) alongside later works edited by Akyürek (2015) and Şeyma Altın (2021). AI-supported tools assisted in organizing and coding themes, while interpretation and validation remained the responsibility of the authors. The findings show persistent debates on curriculum design, academic formation, and theology's social function, demonstrating continuity over time. Nevertheless, recent discussions place stronger emphasis on digitalization, interdisciplinarity, and expanding professional roles. The study concludes that change in Türkiye's higher religious education largely occurs through reinterpretation of inherited frameworks rather than fundamental institutional breaks, contributing to international debates on continuity and transformation in specialized higher education.

Keywords: curriculum reform, interdisciplinary approach, religious education

Islamic education, which began in informal settings, gradually became institutionalized through structures such as the *Suffa* (Hamidullah, 2004). In the context of Türkiye, this trajectory produced a classical madrasa system and, in the modern period, continued through Faculties of Theology and Higher Islamic Institutes. These institutions have consistently sought to preserve religious knowledge, guide society, and maintain cultural continuity (Bruce, 2020). Yet forces such as globalization, digital transformation, and secularization now require reconsideration of traditional structures. A critical reading of the historical legacy therefore offers an essential basis for future strategy. This transformation has unfolded within Türkiye's distinctive socio-political setting, where relations among religion, state, and higher education have been repeatedly renegotiated from late Ottoman modernization to the Republican era (Dorroll, 2017). Consequently, institutional reforms must be understood within wider debates on secular governance, modernization, and public service.

During the Ottoman period, madrasas served as central institutions for religious, philosophical, and scientific education but gradually became unable to meet the demands of a changing era (Kazıcı, 2016; Turan, 2020). With modernization, they were replaced by new institutions such as the *Dârü'l-Fünûn*, where

higher religious education gained institutional form through the establishment of the *Ulüm-ı Âliye-i Dîniyye* branch under Sultan Abdulhamid II (Ayhan, 2000; Koç, 2025; Öcal, 1986). In the Republican period, religious education was reorganized by the 1924 Law on the Unification of Education (*Tevhid-i Tedrisat*), leading to the closure of the Faculty of Theology at Istanbul Dârülfünun in 1933. Higher religious education was reestablished with the founding of the Faculty of Theology at Ankara University in 1949 (Öcal, 2015), followed by subsequent institutional expansion and consolidation, culminating in significant quantitative growth after the 2000s (Altaş & Kaya, 2023; Altın, 2024; Koç, 2025).

Despite quantitative expansion, significant criticism persists concerning the lack of qualitative transformation. Comparable tensions between growth and improvement are widely noted in international scholarship on higher education reform, where increases in enrollment and institutional numbers often do not translate into advances in curricular integration, professional differentiation, or societal relevance. Reform efforts frequently confront institutional continuity, path dependency, and resistance rooted in established academic traditions (Hendek et al., 2022). Placing the Turkish experience within this broader framework shows that enduring debates on theology education are not national anomalies but part of a global challenge surrounding the modernization of faith-based higher education.

In this context, the reports prepared by Ali Fuat Başgil and Muhammed Hamidullah provide important insight into the condition of higher religious education in their period (Hamidullah & Başgil, 1969). Together with more recent volumes edited by Akyürek and Altın, these works mark two major waves of reform in the intellectual history of the field (Akyürek, 2015; Altın, 2021). The earlier wave unfolded amid efforts to secure legitimacy within a secular university framework, whereas the later reflects attempts to respond to globalization, diversification of employment opportunities, and digital transformation (Leirvik, 2018). Bringing these texts into dialogue contributes to comparative debates on how reform ideas travel across generations, how institutional memory shapes policy imagination, and why certain structural and curricular problems remain remarkably persistent despite repeated calls for change.

Higher religious education has experienced multiple institutional transformations in response to shifting historical demands (Genç, 2013). Yet many structural and curricular issues identified in the reports of Ali Fuat Başgil and Muhammed Hamidullah continue to reappear in new forms, suggesting that qualitative change remains incomplete. Recent developments in digital technologies, particularly artificial intelligence, open new possibilities for reassessing these persistent challenges. In this study, AI-assisted techniques were used to identify recurring themes (Jordan & Mitchell, 2015), conceptual shifts, and links between enduring problems and proposed reforms (Xu, 2024) (Jordan & Mitchell, 2015; Xu, 2024). Nevertheless, interpretive authority and final thematic judgments remained with the researchers.

In this study, historical continuity is understood not as institutional immobility but as the recurrence and reformulation of similar structural debates, curricular tensions, and role expectations across different periods. Related this background, the study concerning on: What persistent structural and qualitative problems of higher religious education in Türkiye can be identified across historical and contemporary sources, and what methodological shifts do they indicate?. The aim is to determine the extent to which concerns raised in the reports of Başgil and Hamidullah—such as methodological limitations, and weak societal engagement—continue to shape the field, and how these issues are reinterpreted in more recent works, particularly those edited by Akyürek and Altın.

This study contributes to both scholarly debate and the practical development of educational policy. While many works focus on specific reforms or institutional changes, the long-term persistence of problem formulations across successive waves of reform has received far less attention. A systematic comparison between early Republican critiques and contemporary evaluations therefore remains limited. By reading the reports of Başgil and Hamidullah alongside the later publications of Akyürek and Altın, the study clarifies how to identify these recurring patterns and re-assess earlier recommendations offers guidance for policymakers and curriculum designers seeking more responsive and sustainable strategies. Beyond Türkiye, the study informs international debates on how religious higher education navigates continuity and change

within secular universities. By showing how similar reform themes over decades, it illuminates enduring patterns relevant to other contexts balancing tradition, professionalization, and modernization.

Literature Review

Turkiye's Higher Religious Education: Pre-Republic Period

Scholarship on the pre-Republican era largely examines how the madrasa system confronted modernization while maintaining its epistemological and institutional traditions (Bruce, 2020). Although reform efforts were undertaken, most studies highlight their limited structural impact. The Ottoman legacy strongly shaped the Republican experience, as madrasas had long served not only to reproduce scholarly authority but also to train personnel for religious, administrative, and judicial roles. Yet despite broader Westernization initiatives and the establishment of new educational models, comprehensive reform within the madrasa structure remained exclusive (Kazıcı, 2016).

During the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II, while schools advanced and efforts were made to expand them nationwide, the madrasa system preserved its traditional pedagogical approach. Beyond the madrasas, initiatives were launched to identify or establish a higher religious education institution operating along Western's model. In 1884, plans were drawn up to found the *Ulum-ı Diniyye Mektebi* with the status of a higher school; however, the project did not come to well continued (Zengin, 2002, 2011). By the early 1900s, under Sultan Abdülhamid II, the first higher religious education institution outside the madrasa system—the *Ulûm-ı Âliye-i Dîniyye Şubesi*—was established within the Western-style *Darülfünun*. Although pioneering in location, its curriculum closely resembled that of the madrasas. Renamed *Ulûm-ı Şer'iyye* in 1912, the branch operated alongside broader madrasa reforms initiated in 1909, which sought to incorporate Western-style regulations. In 1914, the *Dârü'l-Hilâfeti'l-Âliye* madrasas introduced more substantial changes, and the *Ulûm-ı Şer'iyye* branch was closed in 1915 (Koç, 2025). The curriculum of the newly established madrasa likewise appeared to be “a continuation of the *Ulum-ı Şer'iyye* branch” (Öcal, 1986; Zengin, 2011). As a result, the higher religious education institution outside the madrasa system was closed, and responsibility reverted to the madrasas.

Turkiye's Higher Religious Education: Post-Republic Period

Post-Republican studies emphasize the redefinition of religion–state relations and the integration of higher religious education into a secular university framework. Debates often center on whether quantitative expansion has been matched by qualitative progress. Following the 1924 Law on the Unification of Education (*Tevhid-i Tedrisat*), the madrasas were closed and replaced by secondary-level Imam Hatip Schools to train personnel for religious services. A Faculty of Theology was also established to educate specialists in religious sciences. While the curriculum of the Darülfünun Higher Religious Sciences Branch (1900) mirrored that of the madrasas, the Faculty of Theology (1924) aimed to train “advanced specialists,” providing a more comprehensive representation of Islamic sciences, though its adequacy remains debated (Akyürek, 2015).

During the Republican period, the Darülfünun Faculty of Theology (closed in 1933) expanded its curriculum to include courses such as Sociology, Psychology, Philosophy of Religion, History of Turkish Beliefs, Ethnography of Islamic Societies, and Islamic Arts, while reducing emphasis on fiqh. This shift reflected a broader focus on social sciences and general culture rather than classical Islamic sciences (Hendek, 2019). After the faculty's closure, the Institute of Islamic Studies was established as a research body without student admission but was itself closed in 1936, effectively ending opportunities to train scholars in academic approaches to Islam or to educate highly qualified religious officials (Öcal, 2015).

Between the closure of the *Darülfünun* Faculty of Theology in 1933 and the opening of Ankara University's Faculty of Theology in 1949, no institution of higher religious education existed, as such establishments were prohibited under prevailing laws (Dorroll, 2017). Within the framework of secularism, the state either ignored religion or approached it restrictively, limiting formal religious education while allowing only minimal non-formal instruction. Post-World War II foreign relations and internal pressures for multi-party democracy prompted renewed interest in higher religious education. From 7 January 1946,

political party platforms began emphasizing the establishment of a Faculty of Theology, reflecting growing public and political recognition of its necessity (Öcal, 2015).

Ankara Faculty of Theology, inaugurated in 1949, began restructuring higher religious education after a sixteen-year interruption. Its founding committee included scholars from philosophy, law, and history but no theologians, and almost all early faculty appointments lacked expertise in religious sciences (Altın, 2024), resulting in a clear shortage of qualified teaching staff. To address the growing demand, the Istanbul Higher Islamic Institute was established in 1959 for Imam-Hatip graduates. By 1971, alongside Ankara and Istanbul, the Erzurum Faculty of Islamic Sciences was opened, further expanding the higher religious education landscape (Aşıkoğlu & Recai, 2012; Öcal, 1986).

A 1983 law brought all higher education institutions in Türkiye under university affiliation. In the 1983–1984 academic year, faculties of theology included the Departments of Tafsir and Hadith, Philosophy and Kalām, and Islamic Civilization and Religious Studies (Öcal, 2015). By 1991, the academic structure was reorganized into three main units: Basic Islamic Sciences (covering Tafsir, Hadith, Islamic Law, Kalām, History of Islamic Sects, Sufism, Arabic Language and Rhetoric); Philosophy and Religious Studies (including History of Philosophy, Islamic Philosophy, Philosophy of Religion, Logic, History of Religions, Sociology and Psychology of Religion, Religious Education); and Islamic History and Arts (covering Islamic History, History of Turkish-Islamic Arts, Turkish-Islamic Literature, and Turkish Religious Music) (Genç, 2013). This subject-centered configuration, largely disconnected from employment fields, remains in place in faculties of theology today (Ahmet Elnur, 2025).

In both the Ottoman and Republican periods, higher religious education was delivered through madrasas, Faculties of Theology, Higher Islamic Institutes, and Faculties of Islamic Sciences, which played a central role in producing, systematizing, and transmitting religious knowledge (Leirvik, 2016). Today, Faculties of Theology train personnel for more than thirty positions, including scholars, *Diyanet* staff, and teachers for the Ministry of National Education. Although these roles require distinct qualifications, a single program and diploma aim to prepare candidates for all, making the faculties de facto multi-purpose institutions (Van Bruinessen, 2018). Curricula, however, have not been designed with specific professional roles in mind; program development has largely involved adjusting courses or contact hours rather than aligning education with graduates' career needs.

Higher religious education in Türkiye reflects a continuous development from the Ottoman period to the present (Akyürek, 2015). Despite significant quantitative expansion, qualitative challenges remain, particularly concerning the purpose, structure, and capacity of institutions. As of 2025, over one hundred Faculties of Theology and Islamic Sciences operate, training personnel for formal and non-formal education as well as future academics. Whether these institutions can effectively fulfill such diverse roles has been a central and enduring debate. Aligning curricula with contemporary educational paradigms and achieving sustainable qualitative transformation remains critical (Altaş & Kaya, 2023; Altın, 2021). Although republican reforms introduced new administrative frameworks, persistent issues around curriculum relevance, academic staffing, and institutional identity echo longstanding concerns from the late Ottoman period.

Method

This study employed a qualitative comparative design based on historical document analysis to trace patterns of continuity and change in problem definitions, reform proposals, and institutional imaginaries in higher religious education in Türkiye. The primary sources are four influential texts addressing structural and content-related issues: the reports of Ali Fuat Başgil and Muhammed Hamidullah (Hamidullah & Başgil, 1969), and the edited volumes by Akyürek (Akyürek, 2015) and Altın (Altın, 2021). The earlier works provide systematic critiques, while the latter reflect contemporary evaluations shaped by expansion, diversification, and globalization. Analysis followed Miles's reflexive thematic framework, emphasizing researcher interpretation (Miles et al., 2014). AI-supported tools (ChatGPT, version 5) assisted only with

data management, data retrieval, and preliminary clustering, while all coding, theme development, and interpretation remained under the researchers' authority.

The analytical process proceeded in three stages. First, documents were read holistically to establish historical and conceptual context. Second, preliminary codes were generated through iterative close reading, supported by AI-assisted text searches. Third, codes were grouped into broader themes, forming the basis for cross-period comparison. The unit of comparison comprised reform arguments in each document, particularly concerning curriculum, institutional organization, academic roles, and societal engagement (Huberman & Miles, 2002).

AI-assisted tools were employed to support the organization of thematic relationships, detect patterns, and suggest alternative categorizations. All AI-generated suggestions were systematically reviewed, revised, or rejected by the authors, who retained full interpretive authority. Contextual judgment always took precedence over algorithmic outputs. AI was therefore used to enhance reflexivity without replacing scholarly interpretation. Continuities were identified when similar problem definitions or reform expectations recurred across temporally distant sources, while reform prospects were derived from forward-looking recommendations. Finally, a SWOT framework was utilized to synthesize patterns, grouping internal characteristics and external conditions.

Findings

Başgil–Hamidullah's reports and Akyürek–Altın's publication represent two significant milestones in the intellectual and institutional history of Türkiye's higher religious education. Although produced in different historical and socio-political contexts, both sets of works share a common objective: to evaluate the condition of religious education and to propose pathways for its renewal in light of evolving academic, and social realities. Offering a comprehensive understanding, the following three subsections present an interconnected analysis. Section 4.1 focuses on the current problems and structural requirements identified in both periods, highlighting the continuities and changes in perceived institutional challenges. Section 4.2 examines the future vision and reform proposals articulated in the reports, exploring how each reflects its historical educational philosophy and aspirations for progress. Section 4.3 analyzes the methodological and conceptual approaches, shedding light on the underlying intellectual frameworks and epistemological orientations that shaped their analyses.

Comparative Analysis in Terms of Current Problems

Comparative reading shows that many criticisms voiced in the early 1960s persist in contemporary evaluations, though reform proposals have been adapted to new institutional contexts. This continuity indicates limited structural resolution despite decades of expansion. Curricular deficiencies are a central concern in both periods. Başgil and Hamidullah criticized the curriculum as overly rote-based and lacking intellectual coherence, proposing the inclusion of comparative religion to contextualize Islamic scholarship. Similarly, Akyürek and Altın identify a fragmented, discipline-centered curriculum that is insufficiently responsive to digital transformation and emerging social realities. Across both eras, the core issue is inadequate curricular integration: early critiques focused on memorization and coherence, while contemporary analyses highlight fragmentation and limited interdisciplinarity.

Concerning academic staff, both periods emphasize the decisive importance of faculty qualifications. Başgil and Hamidullah highlight the need for scholars competent in classical Islamic sciences as well as modern methodologies (Hamidullah & Başgil, 1969). Later studies extend this critique to include pedagogical and instructional limitations. Curricular coherence likewise remains a shared concern (Akyürek, 2015). Earlier reports criticized the dominance of rote learning and advocated comparative perspectives, whereas contemporary analyses describe fragmentation in terms of insufficient responsiveness to digitalization and specialization. This evolution signals a shift from debates over epistemic legitimacy toward pedagogical performance as the primary marker of academic quality.

Practical application represents another area of enduring concern, accompanied by gradual modification in proposed remedies. Başgil and Hamidullah argued that religious professionals—imams, preachers, and teachers—should complement theoretical training with field experience, emphasizing that theology must move beyond textual mastery toward social practice (Hamidullah, 2004; Hamidullah & Başgil, 1969). Akyürek and Altın reaffirm this demand but articulate it through more formalized, practice-oriented models, highlighting cooperation with public institutions and religious organizations (Akyürek, 2015). What appears as innovation in contemporary discourse can therefore be interpreted as the institutionalization of earlier expectations.

In the area of internationalization and interdisciplinary approach, both sets of analyses underscore the importance of expanding intellectual horizons beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries. The early reports advocate for compulsory foreign language education—particularly in Arabic and English—and the inclusion of philosophy, psychology, and sociology within the curriculum, signaling an early call for global and interdisciplinary awareness. The later publications, however, critique the persistent lack of multilingual capacity in the field, suggesting that progress in this area has been limited.

Thus, the evolution from both publications illustrates a shift from reformist critique rooted in modernization ideals to a comprehensive vision aimed at harmonizing tradition with contemporary academic and technological paradigms. The findings discussed above are synthesized and presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Comparative Analysis in Terms of Curricular, Staff, Implementation and Its Approach

Criterion	Başgil & Hamidullah's Reports	Akyürek & Altın Publications
Curricular Deficiencies	Rote learning; weak integration; limited comparative scope	Fragmentation; departmentalization; insufficient adaptation to digital & social change
Academic Staff	Need for scholars bridging classical & modern knowledge	Pedagogical limits; need for continuous development
Practical Formation	Insufficient field experience for religious service	Institutionalized practice models; internship expectations
Interdisciplinary Orientation	Foreign languages; inclusion of philosophy & social sciences	Limited global participation; call for cross-disciplinary projects

The table illustrates that while descriptive vocabulary changes, the diagnostic core remains comparable across periods.

Comparative Analysis in Terms of Future Vision and Reform Proposals

Reform imagination has shifted from centralized institutional design toward flexibility, diversification, and employability. A comparison of Başgil and Hamidullah with the later works of Akyürek and Altın reveals both continuity and transformation in higher religious education in Türkiye. While all share a reformist intent and the goal of aligning theology with contemporary academic and social demands, they differ in emphasis, methodological outlook, and sensitivity to their respective contexts.

Regarding the educational model, Başgil and Hamidullah envisioned a structured academy-type system grounded in hierarchy, deep specialization, and consolidated scholarly authority (Hamidullah & Başgil, 1969). In contrast, the works edited by Akyürek and Altın promote flexibility, modularity, and diversified student pathways, emphasizing adaptation to varied professional outcomes (Altın, 2021). Similar evolution appears in curriculum reform. The earlier reports called for adding comparative religion, contemporary ideologies, and modern scientific thought, whereas the later publications broaden this agenda toward interdisciplinary integration and ethical competencies such as critical thinking, human rights, and ethics.

Technological change also marks a shift in orientation. While Başgil and Hamidullah anticipated digital tools primarily as means of expanding access to knowledge, Akyürek and Altın, writing in a digitally mature environment, stress interactive content, distance education, and active learning as drivers of pedagogical effectiveness. Regarding societal engagement, Başgil and Hamidullah emphasize practical

training to enhance the communicative effectiveness of religious officials, reflecting a service-oriented and vocational approach. By contrast, Akyürek and Altın adopted a community-focused framework that prioritizes lifelong learning, counseling, and public outreach, signaling a shift toward a more inclusive understanding of the social role of religious education (Altın, 2021).

In summary, the comparative analysis demonstrates a historical evolution from the institutional modernization and intellectual defense to the flexibility, interdisciplinarity, and societal engagement of the contemporary period. To facilitate a clearer understanding of the comparative results, the findings have been systematically summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Comparative analysis in term of educational model, curriculum, and technology

Criterion	Başgil & Hamidullah	Akyürek & Altın
Educational Model	Centralized academy structure; hierarchical specialization	Flexible, modular, career-oriented diversification
Curriculum Reform	Comparative religion; ideologies; philosophy	Critical thinking; ethics; human rights; hermeneutics
Technological Transformation	Expansion of materials; modernization of resources	Digital pedagogy; distance learning; interactive formats
Social Engagement	Strengthening communication with the public	Counseling, outreach, lifelong learning

Comparative Analysis of Methodological and Conceptual Approaches

A comparative reading of Başgil–Hamidullah and Akyürek–Altın demonstrates a clear evolution in the reform logic of higher religious education in Türkiye. Writing in an era dominated by modernization, secularization, and institutional reorganization, Başgil and Hamidullah operated within a dual imperative: preserving classical Islamic scholarship while adapting it to modern academic norms. By contrast, Akyürek and Altın address a landscape shaped by digitalization, mass institutional expansion, and increasingly complex relations between religion and society.

In terms of orientation, Başgil and Hamidullah adopt a largely theoretical and institutional perspective, focusing on systemic design and organizational restructuring in order to secure a coherent place for theology within the university (Hamidullah & Başgil, 1969). By contrast, Akyürek and Altın advance a more pragmatic and application-driven approach, prioritizing flexibility, pedagogical innovation, and responsiveness to societal needs. Rather than advocating a single institutional model, they highlight conceptual plurality and adaptable program structures (Altın, 2021). Taken together, these positions trace a broader historical movement in Türkiye from structural adaptation toward epistemological expansion and social relevance. The comparative findings are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3

Comparative analysis in term of time, focus of the approach and social impact

Criterion	Başgil & Hamidullah	Akyürek & Altın
Time and Context	Produced during the religious-political transformation and modernization.	Characterized by digitalization and academic institutionalization
Analytical Focus	Emphasis is on system design and structural hierarchy	Emphasized on practical solutions, flexibility, and conceptual plurality.
Social Impact	The main focus on authority & communication of officials	Academic freedom; community engagement

Discussion

The findings indicate that the reform trajectory of higher religious education in Türkiye is characterized by a striking combination of discursive change and structural persistence (Uğurlu & Çalal, 2019). Although the terminology of reform has evolved in response to shifting political, technological, and academic environments, core anxieties regarding curriculum design, academic formation, and societal relevance continue to recur across generations of critique. This pattern suggests that expansion and diversification have not automatically translated into deep institutional transformation.

The reports prepared by Başgil and Hamidullah in the 1960s primarily address higher religious education from the standpoint of institutional structure. They focus on curriculum deficiencies, shortcomings in academic staffing, and the quality of religious services. Notably, the reports recommend a systematic restructuring of classical Islamic sciences and the development of new institutional models inspired by Western university systems. In contrast, Akyürek and Altın's publication are shaped by more contemporary pedagogical frameworks. They advocate for the integration of classical Islamic sciences with modern social sciences, the application of critical thinking methodologies, and the adoption of student-centered. Nevertheless, clear differences in method and orientation are also apparent. While the Başgil–Hamidullah reports focus more on macro-level, systemic reforms and structural recommendations, the Akyürek–Altın works prioritize micro-level, applied solutions, pedagogical strategies, and societal value creation.

Comparable patterns appear in international research on higher education reform, where expansion and modernization often coexist with durable epistemic traditions. The Turkish case thus reflects a broader global challenge: translating reform discourse into lasting institutional practice, particularly in domains where intellectual heritage remains a key source of authority (Hughes, 2021). From the perspective of SWOT's configuration, it reflected as evidence of historical layering. Identified strengths—entrenched scholarly traditions, social legitimacy, and continuity of mission—generate stability and recognition, yet they may also hinder rapid change by sustaining established hierarchies and expectations. Continuity therefore functions at once as both resource and constraint.

Table 4

SWOT Analysis – Strengths and Weaknesses

Strengths	Weaknesses
A deep-rooted tradition of classical Islamic sciences	A fragmented and overly discipline-centered curriculum
A long-established historical legacy of higher religious education	Pedagogical and methodological deficiencies among academic staff
Strong linkage to socially relevant religious services	Lack of practical training and field experience
A tradition of critical reporting and reform-oriented proposals	Slow progress in internationalization, multilingualism, and digital transformation

As elaborated above, SWOT configuration suggests that higher religious education in Türkiye embodies a complex interplay between institutional durability and adaptive limitation. The strengths identified in the analysis predominantly stem from historically sedimented traditions of scholarship, entrenched organizational legitimacy, and sustained integration with public religious services. These characteristics contribute to continuity in knowledge production, professional formation, and societal recognition (Demir & Toprak, 2023). At the same time, significant structural weaknesses persist. A fragmented, discipline-centered curriculum restricts interdisciplinary engagement and hinders holistic perspectives on religion. Practical training and field experience remain insufficient, widening the gap between theory and application. Moreover, limited foreign language competence and weak participation in international academic networks continue to constrain global visibility and competitiveness.

In summary, while higher religious education in Türkiye benefits from its historical continuity, intellectual depth, and social relevance, it must address key pedagogical, structural, and technological shortcomings to strengthen its academic and societal impact in an increasingly interconnected and knowledge-driven world. Building upon the previously discussed strengths and weaknesses, it becomes evident that higher religious education in Türkiye stands at a both promising opportunities for significant challenges that could hinder progress if left unaddressed. By bridging theology with social sciences, higher

religious education can produce scholars equipped to interpret religious thought in light of modern realities, as mentioned in Table 5

Table 5

SWOT Analysis: Opportunities and Threats

Opportunities	Threats
Strengthening interdisciplinary integration (especially with the social sciences)	Resistance of traditional structures to reform
Integration of digital technologies into education	Frequent changes in education policy and institutional instability
Opportunities for collaboration with public institutions, and mosques	Risk of weak public perception of the societal value of religious education
International academic partnerships and multilingual education	Occasional narrowing of the space for academic freedom

The opportunity–threat constellation positions higher religious education in Türkiye within an increasingly complex matrix of academic, technological, and socio-political transformation. The opportunities reflected in the analyzed materials are primarily associated with expanding zones of interaction beyond traditional disciplinary and institutional boundaries (Demir & Toprak, 2023). Processes such as interdisciplinary engagement, digitalization of learning environments, and participation in transnational academic networks signal potential pathways toward functional diversification and enhanced epistemic exchange.

Simultaneously, the articulation of multiple threats indicates that movement toward these horizons is mediated by constraining variables embedded within governance traditions and organizational cultures. Enduring institutional path dependencies, recurrent shifts in regulatory frameworks, and debates surrounding public legitimacy collectively shape the conditions under which reform initiatives are pursued. References to the vulnerability of academic freedom further underscore that innovation operates within negotiated and sometimes fragile parameters.

The SWOT pattern revealed in the findings portrays a reform environment defined by the coexistence of accumulated authority and adaptive pressure. Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats do not operate as isolated variables; rather, they form an interconnected constellation produced by long-term institutional development. The recognized strengths—historical depth, continuity of scholarly traditions, and durable ties with public religious services—provide legitimacy and stabilize expectations concerning professional roles, curricular limits, and epistemic priorities. Yet these same foundations also delimit the scope of innovation. Reform is typically filtered through inherited norms and organizational routines, encouraging incremental modification rather than structural redesign.

The resulting trajectory is therefore best described as negotiated adaptation. This dynamic clarifies why reform themes persist across decades: problems are acknowledged, yet implementation remains mediated by governance logics that balance responsiveness with stability (Dag, 2022). From a comparative viewpoint, the Turkish experience aligns with broader patterns in higher education, where change commonly unfolds through layering and reinterpretation rather than rupture. Institutional durability is maintained even as expanding societal and technological expectations demand adjustment.

In conclusion, while higher religious education in Türkiye benefits from a wealth of opportunities—ranging from interdisciplinary innovation to technological and international collaboration—it must navigate these challenges with careful strategic planning. Overcoming institutional resistance, ensuring policy stability, enhancing public engagement, and safeguarding academic freedom are essential steps for transforming these opportunities into sustainable progress. When effectively managed, these dynamics can enable higher religious education to evolve into a field that is both intellectually vibrant and socially relevant, firmly rooted in tradition yet dynamically engaged with the realities of the modern world.

Conclusion

This study has examined the evolution of higher religious education in Türkiye through a comparative reading of reform discourses produced in different historical moments. Higher religious education in Türkiye has taken shape through a continuity extending from the Ottoman era to the present and has played a central role in the country's religious, social, and cultural landscape. Faculties of theology have undergone continual transformation through institutional responses to shifting political, social, and scientific dynamics; at times these transformations have been driven by a desire to preserve tradition, and at other times by the need to adapt to contemporary scientific, pedagogical, and technological developments. The comparison between the Başgil–Hamidullah reports and the later contributions of Akyürek and Altın reveals a clear shift in emphasis. Whereas the earlier period was preoccupied with institutional legitimacy and the construction of a stable academic framework, contemporary discussions foreground flexibility, employability, and engagement with technological and global transformations. Yet these differences coexist with persistent structural dilemmas, particularly the challenge of reconciling multiple professional expectations within a unified educational model.

The findings suggest that qualitative limitations in higher religious education cannot be explained solely by deficiencies in curricular content. Rather, they are embedded in deeper organizational patterns that shape how knowledge, authority, and professional preparation are distributed. Recurrent criticisms of rote learning, insufficient interdisciplinarity, and weak practical integration point to the difficulty of translating reform aspirations into durable institutional arrangements. Within this perspective, the long-term sustainability and public relevance of higher religious education depend on the articulation of a renewed institutional vision capable of mediating between inherited scholarly traditions and the demands of contemporary knowledge societies. Tradition is not conceived as an obstacle to innovation; rather, it serves as a reservoir of intellectual resources whose reinterpretation can guide adaptation. Reform therefore requires mechanisms that enable translation between classical epistemologies and modern scientific, ethical, and pedagogical paradigms.

Beyond the national context, the Turkish experience provides an instructive example of how reform processes in tradition-based academic domains tend to proceed through reinterpretation, layering, and selective incorporation rather than through abrupt institutional rupture. Change rarely entails the displacement of inherited epistemic authorities; instead, new expectations are translated into already legitimate frameworks. In this sense, innovation operates through negotiation with continuity. Historical legacies, professional identities, and established organizational routines function simultaneously as enabling resources and limiting conditions, shaping not only what kinds of reforms become imaginable but also how far they can be implemented.

The case therefore foregrounds the dynamic interaction between stability and adaptation. While institutional durability supplies credibility, social trust, and normative orientation, it may also moderate the speed and depth of transformation by privileging incremental adjustment over structural redesign. Reform initiatives are filtered through accumulated patterns of governance, recruitment, and knowledge classification, which tend to preserve recognizable boundaries even when new discourses—such as digitalization, interdisciplinarity, or global competitiveness—gain prominence.

From a policy perspective, this observation underscores the necessity of long-term historical awareness. Evaluations that focus exclusively on immediate outputs or short-term performance indicators risk overlooking the deeper continuities that organize institutional behavior. Understanding how past reform vocabularies are reactivated, reformulated, and embedded within contemporary debates enables a more realistic appraisal of both the possibilities and the limits of change. The Turkish trajectory thus contributes to broader comparative discussions by demonstrating that sustainability in higher education reform often depends less on replacing tradition than on redefining its operational meaning within evolving societal contexts.

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