DEONTOLOGICAL COMPETENCES IN THE PROFESSIONAL TRAINING OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES SPECIALISTS

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the nature, significance, and integration of deontological competences in the professional training of religious studies specialists. Drawing upon contemporary scholarly literature in theology, ethics, pedagogical theory, and deontological philosophy, the paper identifies key cognitive, analytical, communicative, and behavioral dimensions of deontological competence. The study argues that religious studies specialists operate in ethically sensitive environments that demand high levels of moral responsibility, academic neutrality, respect for diversity, and reliability in textual interpretation. Special emphasis is placed on expanding the practical mechanisms for embedding deontological competence into educational programs through reading activities, case-based learning, role-play, ethical discourse, and community-based praxis. Recommendations are provided for strengthening curricula to align educational outcomes with the ethical demands of modern religious studies practice.

INTRODUCTION

The field of religious studies encompasses scholarly, educational, and socially interactive dimensions that are deeply connected to issues of morality, ethics, and human values. Specialists in this discipline must analyze sacred texts, interpret religious traditions, engage with diverse communities, and mediate between worldviews without compromising academic integrity or ethical responsibility. Therefore, the development of deontological competences—skills and attitudes grounded in duty-based ethics and professional responsibility—is essential in preparing future experts. Deontological competence refers to an individual's ability to act according to moral duty, professional norms, and ethical obligations within a particular field (Dadakhanovna, 2020). In religious studies, these obligations include responsible interpretation, neutrality, objectivity, careful communication, and sensitivity to cultural and religious diversity. While numerous studies address theological ethics and the moral responsibilities of religious practitioners, fewer examine the need for deontological training specifically for religious studies

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specialists. Recent works by Khasanova (2024), Msabah (2024), and others show a growing interest in the ethical formation of theologians and religion educators. Given the increasing complexity of religious discourse in modern societies and the centrality of ethical awareness in professional interactions, the need to integrate deontological competence into educational curricula becomes crucial. This article analyzes the structure of deontological competence, reviews existing scholarship, and proposes comprehensive methods for embedding such competencies in the professional training of religious studies specialists.

Methods

This study is based on a qualitative analysis of scholarly literature on ethics, deontology, pedagogy, and professional education in religious studies and theology. Sources from 2019 to 2024 were selected using thematic keywords including "deontological competence," "religious studies education," "theological ethics," "professional preparation," and "ethical responsibility." Academic articles, theoretical studies, and pedagogical frameworks were reviewed to identify recurring patterns, conceptual models, and effective methods of competence development.

The research uses a comparative analytical approach, synthesizing insights from:

1. studies on theological education and spiritual responsibility;
2. research on pedagogical deontology;
3. comparative religious ethics and classical philosophical sources;
4. applied educational models emphasizing praxis, reflection, and ethical interaction.

This method allows for constructing a structural model of deontological competence and proposing practical integration strategies for educational institutions.

Results

Deontological competence within the professional preparation of religious studies specialists encompasses a multidimensional structure that integrates ethical knowledge, interpretive sensitivity, and responsible professional conduct. At its core, it involves a well-developed cognitive foundation, including an informed understanding of major ethical theories—particularly duty-based approaches such as Kantian ethics, theological ethics, and various religious deontological systems—as well as a solid awareness of professional ethical codes and the moral teachings embedded within diverse religious traditions. This cognitive dimension is strengthened by familiarity with the interpretive obligations associated with engaging sacred texts and doctrinal materials. Complementing this is the analytical-interpretive dimension, which enables specialists to conduct objective textual analysis, think critically about ethical dilemmas that arise in religious contexts, and maintain a clear

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distinction between academic neutrality and personal conviction. It also includes the ability to assess the ethical implications of interpretive choices and to evaluate how religious knowledge is applied in practical or social settings.

Another essential facet is the communicative-ethical dimension, which embodies the capacity to interact respectfully and sensitively with individuals from different faith backgrounds, to communicate ideas ethically in both oral and written forms, and to manage interfaith dialogue or conflict situations with professionalism and empathy. This involves cultivating intercultural awareness, active listening, and the ability to mediate disagreements while upholding fairness and neutrality. Finally, the behavioral-practical dimension reflects the specialist's consistent demonstration of ethical responsibility in real-world professional environments. This includes reliability, confidentiality, impartiality, and adherence to professional norms, alongside the ability to implement ethical decision-making when navigating complex social, institutional, or community-based situations. Together, these interconnected dimensions form the structural foundation of deontological competence and serve as a critical component in ensuring that graduates of religious studies programs are prepared to operate with integrity, objectivity, and ethical awareness in both academic and applied professional contexts.

DISCUSSION

The reviewed literature indicates that specialists in religious studies encounter a distinctive set of ethical challenges that arise from the interpretive, communal, and culturally sensitive nature of their professional activities. Because their work often involves engaging with sacred texts, doctrinal interpretations, and diverse religious communities, even minor inaccuracies or biases in interpretation can result in significant academic, social, and ethical repercussions. Inappropriate or insensitive communication may damage interfaith relations, while neglecting the complexities of religious diversity can compromise both scholarly integrity and public trust. For this reason, the cultivation of robust deontological competences is essential. Such competences enable scholars to maintain academic neutrality and objectivity, uphold moral responsibility in the interpretive process, demonstrate respect for pluralistic religious identities, and avoid forms of discourse that may perpetuate harm, prejudice, or misrepresentation. They also ensure adherence to ethical research standards, particularly in fieldwork, interviews, archival work, or community-based studies. Collectively, these capabilities strengthen the scholar's professional credibility and reinforce the broader social confidence placed in experts who analyze and interpret religious phenomena.

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Integration in Professional Training

In comparative ethical readings, students engage with carefully selected passages from multiple religious traditions that articulate concepts of duty, responsibility, and moral law. This activity encourages learners to analyze how different faith systems conceptualize ethical obligation—whether rooted in divine command, rational moral principles, communal expectations, or spiritual discipline. By juxtaposing texts from, for example, Islamic jurisprudence, Christian theological ethics, Jewish halakhic sources, Buddhist moral teachings, or Hindu dharma literature, students are able to identify both the universal principles that transcend individual traditions and the unique interpretive frameworks that shape each tradition's understanding of moral conduct. Such comparative analysis not only enhances students' textual literacy and interpretive sophistication but also deepens their sensitivity to cultural and doctrinal diversity. Moreover, the activity fosters critical thinking by prompting learners to consider how context, language, and theological assumptions influence ethical reasoning. Ultimately, comparative ethical readings cultivate a broader and more nuanced worldview, equipping future religious studies specialists with the ability to recognize shared human values while respecting tradition-specific moral duties. To effectively develop deontological competences, educational programs must incorporate structured, practice-oriented, and reflective learning activities. The following strategies are recommended:

A. Reading-Based Activities (Core Mechanism)

Reading is a central tool for developing ethical reasoning, interpretive responsibility, and moral judgment. Recommended activities include: Students read excerpts from sacred texts, classical religious philosophers (e.g., Maimonides), and modern ethical theorists, analyzing:

- duty-based instructions;
- moral arguments;
- ethical dilemmas;
- implications for modern practice.

2. Comparative Ethical Readings

Students examine passages from different religious traditions that express duty, responsibility, or moral law. Goal: highlight universal ethical principles and tradition-specific duties.

3. Reading Journals (Reflective Diaries)

After each reading, students reflect on:

- what ethical principle was described;
- how it relates to modern professional roles;

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• how interpretation affects real communities.

This trains introspection, neutrality, and responsible judgment.

B. Case-Based Learning

Case studies provide real or hypothetical scenarios that force students to apply deontological principles.

Examples:

1. A scholar interprets a sensitive passage that could offend a minority group—what is the ethical responsibility?

2. A religious studies teacher is asked about a controversial practice—how should neutrality be maintained?

3. A researcher receives confidential information from community members—how should it be protected?

Students analyze duties, consequences, and possible solutions.

C. Role-Play and Simulation

Role-play enables students to practice ethical behavior in simulated environments.

Possible scenarios include:

• interfaith dialogue sessions;

• conflict mediation between belief groups;

• ethical teaching situations;

• press interviews involving sensitive religious topics.

These activities build communicative-ethical competences.

D. Ethical Debates and Structured Academic Discussions

Debates focus on duty-based questions such as:

• "Is neutrality itself a moral duty in religious studies?"

• "Should scholars criticize religious traditions academically?"

• "Where do academic freedom and religious sensitivity intersect?"

Students practice reasoned argumentation grounded in ethical principles.

E. Community-Based Learning (Praxis Approach)

Following Msabah's (2024) praxis model, students engage with real communities through supervised activities:

• observing religious practices;

• participating in educational events;

• assisting interfaith organizations;

• documenting ethical challenges.

These experiences strengthen behavioral and practical competences.

F. Code of Ethics Development Workshops

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Students collaboratively develop an academic "Ethical Code for Religious Studies Specialists," then evaluate:

- its strengths;
- potential ambiguities;
- real-world applicability.

This activity builds both cognitive and analytical aspects of competence.

G. Assessment Mechanisms

To ensure proper development, assessment must include:

- ethical reasoning essays;
- case study reports;
- performance in role-play;
- reading journals;
- reflective portfolios;
- oral exams focusing on ethical decision-making.

Such multidimensional assessment ensures comprehensive evaluation of deontological competence.

CONCLUSION

Deontological competences are foundational to the professional training of religious studies specialists, who must navigate complex ethical, interpretive, and interpersonal responsibilities. This study highlights the structural components of deontological competence and underscores the need for systematic integration into higher education curricula. Reading-based activities, case studies, role-play simulations, ethical debates, praxis experiences, and reflective assessments are highly effective in shaping morally responsible and professionally competent scholars. Strengthening these elements will contribute to producing experts capable of maintaining academic integrity, respecting diversity, and upholding ethical standards in diverse professional environments.

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