THESIS OF DISSERTATION

**Reconsidering Theoretical Approaches to New Religious Movements
and their Surrounding Phenomena**

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I. Summary of the dissertation

In my dissertation, I utilized Ninian Smart's seven-dimensional phenomenological mode of studying religions and integrated new religiosity into his complex theoretical framework, which he established in 1996 in his book "*Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs*." I examined each of Smart's seven dimensions and – if necessary – amended his model to host the numerous forms of new religiosity most efficiently. Moreover, I contextualized this research in an interdisciplinary way that allowed a meaningful interaction between the involved subdisciplines and presented a more detailed and thorough framework – as well as a mode of study – in which contemporary emergent, new, alternative, quasi-, and para-religious phenomena could be studied alongside with more traditional "historical" counterparts. Furthermore, the comparison allowed me to outline the foundational morphological similarities between mainline and minority religiosity, bringing these usually separated fields of inquiry closer to each other.

II. Central claims of the dissertation

1. Theoretical & contextual theses

I approached the complex subject from various angles, including narrative-historical, structuralizing-philosophical, systematizing-socio-psychological, and analytical-ethnological-anthropological perspectives. I outlined three orientations that allowed these various perspectives to supplement each other. Examining the subject phenomena from "above" focused on the historical events of an emerging crisis of prior meaning systems in the 1960s United States. Here, I noted the disruption of biblical religiosity and utilitarian individualism and explored the resulting meaning crisis of "taken-for-granted" meanings and the ensuing crisis of ontological centrality of the Western mind.

After exploring the symptoms of a crumbling of civil religion (such as anthropological denial, spiritual homelessness, structural meaning crisis, and the hollowing of social structures), I pointed out five distinct strategies that new religiosity utilized to maintain or regain a foothold in the aforementioned growing meaning crisis. I stated that each strategy aimed to establish new or renewed intense forms of meaning, security, and belonging while also providing a platform for expressing individuality. From the five strategies, O moted that the "return" and "reform" methods turned to strengthen the former meanings, while the "reinvent," "reorient," and "redefine" strategies offered partial or total replacements of prior meaning systems.

By noting that in postmodern, pluralistic societies, religion does not only have to compete within its own sphere against other contenders but outside it as well, with similar meaning-providing 'secular' structures, I incorporated the secularization theory and its criticism. Creating a thematic outline for the former, I stated that, in the contexts of new religiosity – besides rapid societal and technological innovation – the effects of secularization have contributed to losing former ties to the transcendent. In the context of emergent religiosity, I also incorporated Stark and Bainbridge's rational choice theory (RCT) of a fluctuating religious economy (consisting of a repeating decline-revival-renewal cycle). I connected this theory to the tectonic shift of the 1960s spiritual marketplace, which still affects today's religiosity trends. I also explained how the individual – through increasing his or her own agency – became "both object and follower" in a religious environment that is best described by "fluid stability" and "shapeable certainty." I also pointed out that – in the postmodern settings of new religiosity –

humanity is no longer a "creature" but a lonesome conqueror and, as such, an outsider of nature itself. Reflecting further on postmodernity's narrativity-dissolving nature, I stated that a general "incredulity towards metanarratives" can be seen in contemporary thought, where prior grand narratives no longer stand, as their positions are taken by new – not necessarily all-encompassing –individualized narratives.

2. Disciplinary developmental and terminological theses

Attaining an external perspective, I discussed the interconnected history of New Religions Studies (NRS) with cultic studies and anti-cultism, focusing mainly on the latter's developmental process and outlining the scholarly generations that established this specialization in the past sixty years. Concerning their work, I also highlighted the paradigmatic heritage of the different disciplines that still define certain scholarly attitudes today. In particular, I pointed out that history, sociology, anthropology, and surrogate disciplines may offer a stable value-neutral toolkit and basis when discussing new religiosity. On the contrary, in the case of theology and psychology – due to these fields' historical heritage and established paradigms – I explored why these fields have limited chances of arriving at a value-neutral and objective standpoint when discussing new religiosity.

I also analyzed the history of former terms and the semantical components of the invented term "new religious movements," – outlining its benefits as well as its inherent challenges and the still-rudimental nature. In particular, I compared it to the previous "cult" and "sect" terms, and in each case, I arrived at the conclusion that a value-neutral and objective standpoint cannot be achieved effectively with the semantical heritage these terms carry. I also took time to dissect and examine each component of the term "NRM," pointing out the multi-layered meaning of each word.

3. Dissection of Smart's model

In the major chapter of "*Adapting Ninian Smart's Dual Model to New Religiosity*," I introduced Smart's general approach to the subject. First, I compared the model to other similar methods, such as Glock's or Allport's, while pointing to the fact that Smart's model is a more efficient cross-cultural, dynamic, phenomenological, functionalist mode of study and that each of these elements is indispensable for reaching valid and objective results in the field of the academic study of religions. I underlined the two interlinked layers of the historical and parahistorical dimensions in Smart's model and outlined how these interact and strengthen each other. Stating that all religions function alongside the same exact principal mechanisms, I extracted Smart's thesis of the formational phases of religions, initiated from an extraordinary experience of a religiously attuned individual (*homo religious*). I detailed how experiencing "*das Ganz Andere*" – or the Wholly Other – creates a desire to tell overarching stories about the encounter and – based on humanity's inherent religious interest – how these stories create procedural acts for replaying and reliving said vital experiences. Noting the 'self-strengthening cycle' trait of religiosity's formations, I connected Smart's intermediatory dimension of doctrines with the first three dimensions as well as ethics, social institutions, and a shared materiality.

After completing the essential exchanges between dimensions, I disassembled the proposed model and examined every dimensional component individually to better understand their functions and interactions. At these steps, I also questioned whether Smart's components would be sufficient for my inquiry. To establish a conclusive decision, I tested each dimension

individually and corrected, amended, or replaced specific dated or lacking elements of the model while paying close attention to its integrity and scope. These modifications are, therefore, improvements rather than removals or simplifications.

III.   Key findings and modifications of Smart's model

In the emotional and experiential dimension, I utilized Smart's classification of numinous and luminous experiences. I identified a subclass of bhakti and explored the intersection of panentheistic experiences. I examined each experience individually, highlighting their differences in orientation – whether they turn inward or involve an encounter with the Other externally – and in duration, distinguishing between experience, conversion, and disposition.

To support my points, I presented three brief case studies to assess how well this model applies to new religiosity. In these cases, I contextualized Scientology's auditioning as a form of shamanic healing, the fulfillment of the Holy Spirit in Faith Church as a numinous experience, and Asatru's offerings as a unique expression of bhakti. These analyses led me to conclude that new religious experiences are not fundamentally different from their more historical counterparts.

I approached the narrative and mythical dimension by considering the broader category of "stories." I argued that all myths and narratives serve a common purpose: they establish or reinforce centrality in the cosmos, affirm continuity, and articulate values that remain unaffected by time. To better encompass the variety of narratives in both new and historical religions, I made some adjustments to Smart's structure.

First, I refined the concept of "myths of origin," renaming it to "myths of origin/separation" to highlight their portrayal of a world that is somehow 'wrong' and in need of repair, either by returning to a previous state or moving towards a more ideal future. Methods for achieving this are explored in the sphere of "myths of restoration or salvation." Additionally, to emphasize the "newness" and recent emergence of NRMs, I created a distinct category for stories about charismatic leaders, prophets, and gurus, which I labeled "myths of charisma." I connected these groups through the narrative dimension's key elements of "decay," "enlightenment," and "revelation." I also pointed out that each dynamic reinforces the others: myths of separation explain why the cosmos is in a state of decay, while salvation is revealed through the charismatic leader(s), who have miraculously distanced themselves from decay and now offer salvation through their attained and unique path of enlightenment. These additions further nuanced the model's grasp on the functions of the narratives and stories within religions, allowing for a more focused examination of the myths surrounding founders and leaders. This approach highlighted how these myths influence the complex mythological systems of both 'old' and 'new' religions.

When discussing the ritual and practical dimension, I followed Smart's description of rites, characterizing them as a series of repetitive and methodical bodily acts through which past extraordinary experiences are reenacted and new ones are created. I interpreted rituals as "formal patterns of behavior," noting that they impose strict rules on bodily actions and have a clear structure, referred to as "*li*" (orderly behavior). I differentiated between outward-facing focused rituals and inward-facing harnessing rituals. In the outward-facing category, I identified magic, sacrifice, worship (both pure worship and life as worship), and rites of passage. I mentioned that the agency and power dynamics within these open categories could vary significantly, ranging from simple offerings made without expecting a response to sacrifices –

interpreted as an equal-effort transaction between humans and the Other – all the way to attempts to compel the transcendent to fulfill the practitioner's requests through magical practice. In comparison to historical examples, I noted several instances of necessity for modification. First, I noted a "diminution in the complexity of rituals" in new forms of religiosity, where the focus has shifted from traditional procedural forms and repetition toward individual experience and emotional intensity. I identified the weakening of priestly roles and intermediaries as a root cause of this change. Secondly, this shift has altered how the Other is approached and perceived in contemporary religiosity. In this new context, the Other is always compelled to reveal itself. As a result, the previous interpretation of focused rituals as bhakti – viewed as a distancing and inherently passive form of worship – was no longer tenable. I came to the concluding statement that rituals of new religiosity are more magical by nature. Finally, as a reflection on Smart's first 'cycle,' I observed that one can also interpret ritual practices in today's age as mirrors. As historical rites were conducted with certainty, procedurality, and repetition – fostering a more orderly and spiritually enriched world – the rituals of postmodernity are rushed, intense, irregular, and solitary, suggesting a new – though not necessarily better – type of livelihood and spiritual engagement in our contemporary era.

I amended Smart's sixfold approach in the doctrinal and philosophical dimension (which included attitudinal, definitional, descriptive, scientific, responsive, and reconciliatory functions) and added an overlay to link these mechanisms through doctrines concerning the self, the Other, the collective, and the external. Additionally, I introduced doctrines of charisma to connect all these elements. I differentiated all these based on their two core functions: mediating between other dimensions and enhancing their essential meanings. Through this overlay, I outlined the channels and forms for stabilizing religious self-perception and for theological or dogmatic interpretations of the Other. Furthermore, I clarified how specific philosophical and dogmatic concepts foster cohesion by reinforcing collective identity and stabilizing external interactions. I also noted that each cluster is interconnected through the doctrines of charisma.

Regarding ethics and legalities, I made some additional revisions. Smart's approach was either too vague – implying that cross-cultural morality can be reduced to the simple idea of "being good" – or overly specific, which detracted from the broader search for common morphological elements. While Smart's general concepts were not necessarily incorrect, I believed that adopting Wallis's tripartite approach would enhance the systematic framework. Inspired by this, I introduced three ethical standpoints: restrictive/conservative, integrative/adoptive, and liberative/dissolving, all in comparison to a dominant majority society. This framework allowed me to differentiate movements based on their collectivistic or individualistic perspectives and their restrictive or liberative approaches to ethical and moral dilemmas.

In the social and institutional dimension of religion, I began by examining a wider range of characters and figures, such as the priest, prophet, contemplative, avatāra, saint, and martyr. However, even Smart acknowledged that these figures are closely tied to specific historical contexts. Consequently, they may not carry the same significance in the postmodern setting, where personal beliefs, chosen faith, and individual worldviews often overshadow the influence of religious institutions and heritage. These insights prompted me to revisit the social and institutional dimension, aiming to enrich it with a more atemporal overlay. By adhering to Smart's meta-, collective-, and individual systems, I restructured this dimension. I shifted the centralized and loosely hierarchical systems of religious institutions to the collective level while

maintaining the meanings at the conceptual meta-levels. As a result, the individual level experienced substantial enhancement, particularly with the introduction of the follower, the subordinate specialist, the charismatic leader, and most notably, the solitary practitioner. This last addition significantly transformed the social dimension. Upon further reflection, I recognized that this change fits well within the existing model and addresses aspects that have been largely overlooked. First, it highlighted the creative "social laboratory" functions of NRMs. It also emphasized the importance of individuality and its relationship with collectivism: individuals strive to maintain their uniqueness while feeling a pull to be part of something larger. This continuous interplay is a distinctive feature of contemporary religiosity, which I was able to grasp more fully with the support of Smart's framework.

In my exploration of the extensive material and artistic dimension of religiosity, I examined how "*The Dimensions of Sacred*" structured its discussion around buildings and environments that reflect the transcendent. I paid close attention to the ways in which these places are embodied, depicted, and interpreted. I then moved on to material objects associated with religiosity, such as ritual clothing, various worn materials, holy books, related writings, and even bodily marks like scarring, branding, or specific hair and beard styles. After this detailed investigation, I shifted to a broader perspective, observing that both adorned and plain walls, elaborate and minimalist objects, as well as cleanliness and disorder, can evoke profound feelings of something incomprehensibly greater. I emphasized that the specifics of materiality shape the types of religious experiences one has, as sensory experiences—those that are seen, heard, touched, smelled, and tasted—serve as primary factors in creating extraordinary and otherworldly feelings. Through this analysis, I identified a critical function of materiality: it makes what is previously intangible and incomprehensible more accessible and "digestible" for those engaged in it. I illustrated this function in new forms of religiosity with two brief case studies. The decorated walls and extensive artistic production of Damanhur demonstrated how individuality can be expressed through material culture, while the concept of bricolage religiosity highlighted the homogenizing effects of materiality. This was further explored through the example of the "orange people" of Rajneesunam, where I discussed how homogeneity can diminish individuality, creating a sense of safety that aligns with the "taken for granted" meanings referenced in the introduction. Together, these perspectives shed light on how materiality can serve as both an individualizing and collectivizing tool. Finally, I examined texts in new religiosity, noting significant differences compared to similar materials in historical forms of religiosity. First, I observed that new religiosity produces a diverse and larger body of textual works than its predecessors. Second, I outlined various ways in which new religious movements (NRMs) engage with earlier texts, including incorporation, innovation, addition, and invention. Third, I recognized that NRMs' sacred texts are no longer afforded special treatment. Lastly, I offered an important update to Smart's observations from 1996, which did not account for the impact of digital textuality and materiality. This development fundamentally reshapes how material elements—especially religious texts—are approached and studied in the context of NRMs.

IV. Exploring the perspectives for the field of inquiry – surrogate-, quasi-, para- and event religiosity

After completing the previously mentioned 'static' examinations, I investigated how the model performs as an overlay for existing research in dynamic settings. This in-depth analysis led me to realize that the boundaries of religiosity might extend further than I initially expected. I

identified religious, or more accurately, quasi-religious structures and functions within subcultures, festivals, and even conspiracy groups.

My exploration of Burning Man allowed me to reconnect with the beginning of my dissertation and emphasize humanity's inherent religious inclination. This concrete example demonstrated that even today, some individuals find extraordinary experiences in unconventional settings, thereby reestablishing their own sense of *illud tempus* and *illud spatium* at festivals, concerts, and mass events through the channels of religion that Smart so precisely outlined.

Consequently, my original argument – that in postmodern contexts, the meaning-providing functions of religiosity do not diminish but instead transform and influence other spheres – has been reaffirmed. Additionally, I have provided concrete evidence that contemporary conditions may compel 'secular' environments to exhibit similar carriers of intensity, meaning, security, and belonging. Most importantly, they offer ways for individuals to express their uniqueness while being part of something greater.

V. Concluding statement

In this dissertation, I adopted a morphological-phenomenological angle to introduce, examine, and refine Ninian Smart's dual model from 1996. With my analysis and case studies findings, I believe I have accomplished my primary goal: to systematize the emergence of new religious movements (NRMs) and to provide a new, more comprehensive framework for discussing and disseminating both collective phenomena and specific cases.

The most significant realization for me was forming a meaningful connection to Eileen Barker's perspectives, who noted that there is essentially nothing new about new religiosity – except for its relatively recent emergence and accelerated development. Smart's multi-dimensional approach corroborated this view, linking back to early insights from Bernard Greely, who argued that the fundamental human religious needs and functions have not markedly changed since the late Ice Age.

VI.   MTMT ID: 10070737

VII.   Relevant & cited publications in the dissertation

- Nemes, Márk (2023): QAnon as an American Quasi-religious Formation. In *Journal of the Korean Academy of New Religions* 48, pp. 91–119.

- Nemes, Márk (2023): Subcultural Identity as a Surrogate or Quasi-Religiosity. In *Journal of the Korean Academy of New Religions* 49, pp. 79–101.

- Nemes, Márk (2024): An atypical base-community: research findings and corrected perspectives for the Icelandic Ásatrúarfélagið // An Atypical Base-community. In *International Journal for the Study of New Religions* 12 (2), pp. 235–259.

- Nemes, Márk (2025 (Forthcoming)): Investigating Identity Among Second-Generation Hungarian Scientologists. In *Nova Religio*.

- Nemes, Márk; Máté-Tóth, András (2022): Revisiting New Religions, Attitudes and Policies in the United States and Central-Eastern Europe

between the 1960s and 2010s. In *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review* 13 (2), pp. 145–161.

VIII.   Other, non-cited publications relevant to the dissertation's topic:

- Nemes, Márk (2024): A társadalmi és tudományos diskurzus hatásai az új vallási mozgalmak kutatására. In Márk Nemes (Ed.): Ütközéspontok X. A Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége Filozófiatudományi Osztálya konferenciájának kötete Budapest: DOSZ, pp. 77–87.
- Nemes, Márk (2024): Az új vallási mozgalmak sokfélesége. In András Máté-Tóth (Ed.): A konvivencia kihívásai. A vallási sokféleségről Kelet-Közép-Európában. Budapest: L'Harmattan, pp. 141–165.