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Commercialization of religions worldwide: A look through Ninian Smart's Seven Dimensions of Religion

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Abstract

The growth of global consumer culture and associated phenomena in other realms of life is a fact of the past half century. It is also a truism that significant new religious phenomena have emerged, including so-called megachurches that directly draw on contemporary capitalism and corporate culture. In the sociology of religion, three main competing perspectives have emerged to explain the situation: reformulations of secularization theory, rational choice theory or economics of religion, and the neoliberal perspective on religion. This presentation follows the last of these perspectives and makes its case by utilizing Ninian Smart's heuristic model of the seven dimensions of religion. Hence, we shall look at how religions have been commercialized through the lenses of the (1) practical and ritual, (2) experiential and emotional, (3) narrative or mythic, (4) doctrinal and philosophical, (5) ethical and legal, (6) social and institutional, and (7) material dimensions. Smart's framework allows us to discuss the different developments, consequences and repercussions for religion when adapted/adapting to a new neoliberal rationale.

1. Introduction

The global turn of the 1980s emerged with the establishment of neoliberal policies in several states around the world and came to full fruition with the end of the cold war a decade later. Since then, globalization has been a driving force in global economy, politics, and culture. The growth of multinationals, transnational companies, international non-governmental organizations, and international migration has unfolded concomitantly with transformations in information and communication technologies as well as in transportation

and growing consumerism. All this has created a more interconnected human world than ever before. (Held et al., 1999; Harvey, 2005.) Initial interest in economic globalization soon inspired wider debates in the social sciences, including the study of religion (Robertson, 1992).

Peter Beyer (1994; 2006; 2013) counts among the scholars of religion who have dedicated their academic careers to understanding the consequences of globalization on religious life worldwide. Beyer debates the above-mentioned changes from the perspectives of sociology of religion and religious studies in his article "Religion in the 21st Century: Disciplinary critique, global restructuring, categorical diversity" (2021), where he identifies five different strands of research than have all grappled with these changes. These are the (1) critical religion approach that interrogates the usefulness of the category of 'religion' on a global and cross-cultural scale, (2) the religious market theory that views religions through the lenses of economic theory, (3) the lived religion and spiritual revolution perspectives that focused on everyday religious expressions rather than the activities of historical and institutional Christian churches, (4) the marketization or consumerization perspective that highlights the impact of neoliberalization on contemporary religion and religious life, and (5) research that focuses on the growing phenomenon of 'non-religion'. While Beyer's intentions lie elsewhere, he nevertheless views all these research orientations as responses to the decline of the Westphalian system, which for a long time defined the relative positions of the state vis-á-vis religion and was inbuilt into the secularization paradigm in the sociology of religion.

A common feature of the above-mentioned perspectives is that they offer novel views on changing religious phenomena and ways of organizing religion. To follow this lead, in this article we use Ninian Smart's (1989) model of dimensions of religion as a heuristic device (cf~~,~~ ~~–~~. Hödl, 2023, p. 13) to help to point out the manifold implications of commercialization, and more widely neoliberalism, on contemporary religion and religious life on a global scale.

We position ourselves in the neoliberal understanding of contemporary religious changes that affords the market—understood as a normative model of organizing society also outside its traditional realm—a key structuring role. Considering Smart's model, the aim of this chapter is therefore to illustrate how neoliberalism and market ideology have been directly implicated in a range of significant changes in the contemporary religious field (cf. Gauthier, 2020; Guest, 2022).

2. Reimagining the market, the rise of consumer culture and the neoliberal turn

In historical perspective, the principal ideational underpinnings of modern-day consumer culture can be traced back to the liberal philosophy and classical political economy of the 17th and 18th centuries as developed by thinkers such as John Locke, Adam Smith, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and David Ricardo. The primary goal of liberal thought was to establish new fundamental principles for the organization of social and political life that would amount to a 'political zero-sum game between citizens and states' (Slater & Tonkiss, 2001, p. 29) and thus safeguard the autonomy of the rational individual. In this, liberal thought played a decisive role in establishing individualism as '"theory of society" in which the well-being of individuals is an always prominent, usually primary, and often the only politically relevant value' (Walls, 2015, p. 3).

In their efforts to provide a foundation for the organization of social life that would safeguard individual freedoms while simultaneously being able to maintain social order, liberal thinkers found inspiration in contemporaneous economics and its greatly expanded (and at the time quite novel) understanding of the 'market'. As most famously and influentially outlined in Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (2009/1776), rather than simply constituting an actual physical place or space for commerce and the exchange of goods, the 'market' was understood as providing a fundamental non-political, non-coercive,

and impartial coordinating mechanism of the social *as a whole* (Slater, 1993, p. 42). This expanded notion of the 'market' would come to play a central role in the wider popularization of the notion that social wellbeing as a whole is not only advanced by, but is directly dependent on, the self-centered actions of individuals (Walls, 2015, p. 13).

It is consequently in these ideas that we can locate the origins of the modern notions of 'consumption' and the 'consumer'. In earlier times, the word 'consume' had carried clear connotations of 'waste', of something being 'spent', 'used up' or being 'exhausted'. Following the wide establishment of liberalist classical economics, however, the word 'consume' took on a range of new meanings and increasingly started to be used to refer to the principal means whereby individuals—now reconfigured as 'sovereign consumers'—went about satisfying their independently determined needs and wants in a broader 'marketplace' of social and cultural (including religious) life. Furthermore, following these developments, the notion of the 'consumer' also becomes ever more firmly connected to the enactment and realization of 'personal liberty' and the 'accountability of social institutions to private interests' (Slater, 1993, p. 35). It is consequently also in these ideas that we can locate the philosophical origins of the subsequently developed notion of 'market society', that is, a society where 'a market logic has come to provide a means of thinking about social institutions and individuals more generally, such that notions of competition, enterprise, utility and choice can be applied to various aspects of people's working lives, access to public services and even private pursuits' (Slater & Tonkiss, 2001, p. 1).

Consumer culture as an actual empirical phenomenon thus stretches back several hundreds of years. It would, however, take until the 1920s before consumer goods had become assimilated into everyday life to such an extent that it becomes justified to describe the 1920s as the first 'consumerist decade' in which 'all of the features which make up [modern-day] consumer culture take on their mature form' (Slater, 1993, p. 13). The

advancement of consumer culture and the ethos of consumerism that underpins it was further greatly aided by the rise and global spread of neoliberal political economy from the early 1980s onward. Briefly, the political economic doctrine of neoliberalism is marked by its strong emphasis on the supremacy of the unregulated, free 'market' and its extension across all societal domains, including, not least, domains conventionally considered 'non-economic' (for a detailed discussion, see Blyth, 2002; Harvey, 2005).

When it comes to its view of the relation between society and the individual, neoliberalism constitutes a direct continuation, and indeed radicalization, of earlier liberalist ideals in that it 'proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade' (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). In the neoliberal imagination, *consumption* (primarily understood as the continuous purchasing of goods and commodities) therefore becomes intimately connected to 'the most profound, deep structural values and promises of modernity: personal freedom, economic progress, civic dynamism and political democracy' (Slater, 1993, p. 35; cf. Lury, 2011, p. 6). This not only suggests that everyone *can* be a consumer, but that everyone *should* or indeed *must* be a consumer, and that social order, progress, and wellbeing fundamentally depends on it. In neoliberalism, the 'consumer' therefore ceases to be a 'passive dupe' and instead develops into a 'master category of collective and individual identity' (Trentmann, 2006, p. 11).

The establishment and perpetuation of consumerism as the principal cultural ethos of late modernity has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention. Considering the wide range of perspectives that have been brought to bear upon the subject, suffice to say, following Lury (2011, p. 11), that 'different perspectives place a different emphasis on consumption as buying, consumption as having, consumption as being or consumption as doing'. In a

thoroughly globalized and still rapidly *globalizing* world, the ideational force of consumerism will therefore continue to be 'felt to the extent that people's aspirations, their hopes and fears, vocabulary of motives and sense of identity are defined in its terms' (Lury, 2011, p. 13).

3. Overview of scholarship on religion, market and consumer culture

The bulk of all previous scholarship on religion, markets, and consumer culture can be divided into three main categories of research, each of which also represents a particular type of approach to the field. As previously outlined by Moberg (2022, pp. 168–180; cf. Moberg & Martikainen, 2018), these categories can be labelled the 'religion *as* market' approach, the 'commodification of religion' approach, and the 'marketization of religion' approach.

The 'religion *as* market' approach is firmly connected to the broader 'economics of religion' scholarship that was established in the late 1980s and early 1990s (e.g., McCleary, 2011). Although encompassing several sub-fields and more specific approaches, such as the Rational Choice Theory of Religion (e.g., Stark & Finke, 2000) and the 'New Paradigm' of sociology of religion in the United States (e.g., Warner, 1993), this scholarship is united in its view of the religious field as constituting an 'economy' *in and of itself*. Hence, in economics of religion scholarship, the religious field is approached through the lenses of economic theory and is therefore taken to develop in accordance with 'market dynamics' such as levels of overall 'religious supply', competition between 'religious firms', fluctuations in religious 'demand', and so on.

The notion of a 'marketplace' or 'economy' of religion is, however, far from new. Indeed, a notable precursor can be found already in Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (2009 [1776]), where Smith outlines an early theory of church and congregational success in a situation of pluralist competition (Warner, 2010, pp. 70–71). In line with his broader political economic thinking, Smith contended, for example, that as smaller independent

congregations grew and strove to attain higher degrees of respectability, they simultaneously also tended to succumb to 'learning and indolence' and gradually began neglecting the 'art of popularity' (Smith, cited in Warner, 2010, p. 70). In line with the basic tenets of liberal thought, Smith therefore concluded that liberal society would benefit from a pluralistic situation and 'free market of religion' since that would 'prevent any one form of religion becoming too powerful an influence upon the state' (Warner, 2010, pp. 70–71).

Another notable precursor is found in Peter L. Berger's notion of a 'religious marketplace' as presented in *The Sacred Canopy* (1967). In a general situation of growing religious pluralism, Berger argued, "the religious tradition has to be 'marketed' and 'sold' to a clientele that is no longer constrained to 'buy'" (Berger, quoted in Gauthier, 2018, p. 383). Such a 'pluralistic situation', he went on to argue 'is, above all, a market situation that transforms religious communities into 'marketing agencies' and religious traditions into 'consumer commodities' (ibid.). With his notion of a 'religious marketplace' Berger departed significantly from prevailing contemporaneous perspectives on the religion-market/economy relationship, most of which were grounded in Ferdinand Tönnies' (1970 [1887]) classic distinction between *Gesellschaft* (society) and *Gemeinschaft* (community) and thus based on the view that, although modern religion exists and operates in a broader market economic environment, it nevertheless preserves a "'non-marketable' core in so-doing" (ibid.). In Berger's account, however, following the erosion of traditional institutional religion and its associated forms of sociality, "religion itself thereby became marketable" (Gauthier, 2018, p. 384). Whether Berger intended his employment of terms like 'religious marketplace' and 'religious consumer commodities' to be understood literally or not, as pointed out by Gauthier (2018, p. 383), his arguments can nevertheless be thought of as constituting an 'inaugural moment', marking a broader shift in scholarly thinking about how the religion-market relationship could/should be approached and conceptualized.

The 'commodification of religion' approach became increasingly established around the turn of the new millennium. This body of scholarsip has always been highly diverse in terms of its theoretical perspectives, particular areas of focus, and analytic terminology. For example, while most of this scholarship operates with the term 'commodification', the terms 'commoditization' and 'commercialization' are also common. Generally, there is a clear tendency in 'commodification of religion' scholarship to employ terms like these in a largely *heuristic* sense to refer to the particular ways in which contemporary religion and religious life can be argued to have become *subsumed by* the modern capitalist market economy and made into a conduit for the further promotion and naturalization of capitalist ideology and corporate values.

Because of this, 'commodification of religion' scholarship has tended to mainly focus on the creation of *actual*, tangible religious/spiritual 'products', 'commodities' or 'services' designed for individual consumption. Oft-explored cases include different forms of material culture associated with particular religious traditions (e.g., Christian and Buddhist 'kitsch' and home decoration items); the 'religionification' of various types of leisure activities (e.g., Christian workout programs, *halal* holiday resorts, the 'Tao' of everything from gardening to 'health, sex and longevity', (as one book has it); for-fee services and provisions offered by particular religious organizations (e.g., courses in Transcendental Meditation or Scientology auditing-sessions); and especially the wide array of ideas, practices, and provisions conventionally subsumed under the heading of 'new age', 'holistic' or 'alternative spiritualities'. (E.g., Lau, 2000; Carrette & King, 2005; Heelas, 2008; Miller, 2008; Lofton, 2017.)

The 'marketization of religion' approach is, as its name suggests, more firmly connected to the notion of marketization, which can generally be defined as the process whereby the values and imperatives of the market economy make their ways into and become

increasingly established throughout traditionally non-market domains (e.g., education, healthcare, religion). As explained by Gauthier:

> Approaching the study of religion through the marketisation approach signifies that 'the market' is identified as the most salient and defining feature of contemporary societies: both the market as a social and societal institution (the actual market), and the market as idea and ideal (Durkheim: a moral ideal) of optimal social regulation and production of meaning (Gauthier, 2018, p. 390).

While by no means inherently incompatible with 'commodification of religion' scholarship, the focus of 'marketization of religion' scholarship nevertheless mainly lies on the impact of neoliberal political economy on the *meso*-level of social institutions and organizations and the *macro*-level of state and inter-state institutions. Examples of marketization of religion research include the establishment of new forms of 'pluricentric' network governance of religion on the part of particular states (Martikainen, 2013), the growth of so-called faith-based initiatives in the areas of welfare provision (Grey, 2013; Hackworth, 2013), the adoption of market-centered language and discourse by historical institutional Christian churches (Moberg, 2017), and consumer culture-driven changes in national religious regimes throughout non-Western regions, most notably Asia (Gauthier, 2023).

While all three main approaches, in their various ways, try to grapple with the impact of the capitalist neoliberal market economy on the present-day religious field, they nevertheless differ notably with respect to their main theoretical underpinnings and areas of focus. The heuristic, analytical, and explanatory value of economics of religion scholarship, in particular, continues to be the subject of critical debate (for a more detailed discussion, see Moberg, 2022, pp. 168-175; Gauthier & Spickard, 2022). Notwithstanding ongoing debates and disagreements, the simple fact *that* the religious field has been profoundly affected by the values and imperatives of modern neoliberal market society and consumer culture is not in dispute.

As numerous studies have demonstrated in ample depth and detail (e.g., Einstein, 2008; Martikainen & Gauthier, 2013; Gauthier & Martikainen, 2013; Stolz & Usunier, 2014; Guest 2022), religious communities of virtually all strands have, for quite some time already, and with increasing sophistication, been employing a range of advertising, management, marketing, and branding techniques as part of their efforts to make themselves stand out amidst an increasing array of competing leisure activities and lifestyle choices. Conversely, as Stolz and Usunier (2014, pp. 7–8) point out, there is also plenty of evidence to suggest that individuals increasingly expect to be able to exercise individual *choice* when it comes to their religious commitments and preferred modes of religious practice. There is plenty of evidence, therefore, pointing towards a more general transition to what Stolz and Usunier (2014, p. 4, Italics in original) refer to as a 'religious consumer society'; that is, a 'society in which religious organizations *see themselves* as offering "products" and "services" on a "market", while individuals *see themselves* as "consumers" choosing these "products" and "services"'.

4. The Seven Dimensions of Religion by Ninian Smart

Ninian Smart developed his phenomenological perspective on religion through the notion of *dimensions of religion*. Overall, Smart's strategy was to avoid a narrow definition of religion in favor of a more open-ended perspective that would be applicable to a variety of contemporary and historical traditions as well as key secular ideologies (Smart, 1989, p. 9). While his dimensions model has been criticized for allowing almost anything to be seen as 'religion', for example, nationalism, it nevertheless provides a useful tool for analyzing various aspects of religious action and thought. A fully developed perspective is published in the introduction of his book *The World's Religions* (1989, pp. 10–21).

Since Smart first created his model, the concept of 'religion' has become the subject of ongoing scholarly debate. While some scholars mainly focus on the analytical value of the

concept of religion (e.g., Arnal & McCutcheon, 2013), others have instead questioned whether 'religion' has become too narrow of a concept to understand and analyze contemporary lived realities. As numerous scholars have pointed out, 'spirituality' has become a preferred concept by many, which reflects an increasing establishment and normalization of a less institution-bound understanding of 'religion' and 'religiosity'. The key difference lies in matters of agency. Whereas 'religion' is increasingly taken to refer to a somewhat organized, collectively shared belief system and its associated practices, 'spirituality' refers to personalized, though by no means solitary, belief-systems based on individual intuition and choice. (Roof, 1999, pp. 33-43; Heelas & Woodhead, 2005, pp. 5-6.)

Our own position in this particular debate is that the rise of spirituality contra religion is inherently linked to the rise of individualism and consumer culture and simply replicates the ideals of consumerism, according to which it becomes the individuals' task to craft their own and unique authentic identities and lifestyles out of the range of consumer products available to them (cf. Carrette & King, 2005; Martin, 2014). The presumed replacement of 'religion' by 'spirituality' constitutes more of a *perceived* rather than necessarily 'real' shift in agency from the collective to the individual. (For a more detailed discussion, see Gauthier, Woodhead & Martikainen, 2013.) We therefore see no clear-cut difference between 'religion' and 'spirituality' as descriptive and analytical concepts, but rather a change in the contexts that influence how people perceive and interpret social reality. As Peter Beyer amply puts it:

> [S]pirituality is one of those terms which marks off the peculiarity of modern religion. Designating a variety of activity or orientation as spirituality is a way of seeking exemption from certain of the characteristics of what has come to be regarded as religion, but not others. It is a way, as it were, to 'look like a duck and quack like a duck', but avoid identification as a duck. (Beyer, 2006, p. 8.)

As we shall continue to discuss as several points below, central to many more recent developments in the contemporary religious field—the proliferation of 'spirituality' included—is the extent to which broader consumer culture-driven processes of

individualization can be shown ‘to have turned religious belief and practice into something chosen rather than given, adopted rather than ascribed, voluntary rather than obligatory, and subjective rather than collective’ (Moberg, 2022, p. 125). The ways in which accelerating processes of religious individualization have been fueled by the wide establishment of consumerist sensibilities have also been noted by several scholars of religion in the past. Indeed, as early as his influential *The Invisible Religion* (1967), Thomas Luckmann had highlighted the proliferation of ‘individual religions cobbled together by consumers who pick and choose what suits them and what will justify their personal lifestyle, given the preferences that result from their social context and personal biography’ (Martin, 2014, p. 43). As noted above, since then, the impact of consumer culture on contemporary religious sensibilities have been the subject of continuous and sustained scholarly attention.

In the following section, we will exemplify through Smart’s seven dimensions of religion what kinds of changes have taken place among religions worldwide following the increased influence of consumer culture, commercialization and the neoliberal impulse. We do not claim that comparable changes could not have taken place previously in human history, but rather claim that the changes highlighted here can be understood though the neoliberal lens within which these changes emerge not as complete departures from previous ways of thinking or acting, but rather as particular types of adaptions to existing cultural, social, political, and economic realities. In the beginning of discussing each dimension of religion we also briefly introduce how Smart defines it.

4.1. The Practical and Ritual Dimension

Smart’s first dimension of religion is the practical and ritual dimension (Smart, 1989, pp. 12-13). It refers to the *doing* of religion through ‘worship, preaching, prayers, and so forth’ (ibid., p. 12), and ‘other patterns of behavior, which [--] fulfill a function in developing

spiritual awareness or ethical insight' (ibid., p. 13), such as Yoga or meditation. Religious practice is among religious people an everyday activity, and often initially learned at home and at a religious institution.

During past decades, many Protestant Christian Churches have actively striven to renew their religious services and worship practices. For example, Finland's majority church—the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland—has been utilizing various forms of popular music in church settings quite extensively since the early 2000s, including pop, jazz, heavy metal, schlager and electronic dance music (Moberg, 2018). Only a few decades prior, integrating such popular cultural expressions into the core ritual of the church would have been considered offensive, if not outright blasphemous. This, however, is not an isolated development. Its roots can be found in so-called Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) and Contemporary Worship Music (CWM) that initially sprang from the congregational contexts most influenced by the pan-denominational Jesus Movement of the late 1960s (e.g., Ingalls, 2016). While CCM mainly strove to emulate 'secular' forms of popular music for Christian audiences, CWM was explicitly developed to aid collective, corporeal Christian worship.

Closely mirroring developments in CCM, the 1970s witnessed the creation of a distinct CWM industry, complete with its own independent production companies, record labels, specialized media, licensing organizations, and later digital platforms (e.g., Nekola, 2013). Producers of CWM thus adapted similar forms of production, promotion, dissemination, and consumption as other popular culture producers. Following its eventual diffusion on an international scale, CWM has played an important part in the renewal of Protestant worship practices worldwide. (Wagner, 2017, p. 92; Kelman, 2018, p. 118.) But even though CWM was originally designed to aid collective worship, since the early 2000, it has increasingly started to be marketed towards *individual* listeners. In the words of Anna Nekola, this development is more broadly reflective of an "ongoing redefinition of 'worship' from

traditionally corporate to an increasingly individualized act’ “” (Nekola, 2013, p. 117) and a shift “from attendance to experience, and from belief to lifestyle” (ibid, p. 121).

Hence, while we still do have traditional church services and religious rituals, alongside these, a range of new popular culture-inspired practices have gained popularity and thus significantly changed how people both engage in and experience religious worship. These developments are clearly reflective of the impact of consumer culture in that religious communities have become increasingly willing to re-configure their established practices to better suit the (popular) cultural sensibilities and lifestyle choices of modern populations and various ‘taste groups’ and ‘niche publics’ (Moberg, 2018, p. 36).

4.2. The Experiential and Emotional Dimension

Smart’s second dimension, the experiential and emotional dimension, is about *feeling* religion (Smart, 1989, pp. 13-14). Following Smart, “it is obvious that the *emotions* and *experiences* of men and women are food on which the other dimensions of religion feed: ritual without feeling is cold, doctrines without awe or compassion are dry, and myths which do not move the hearers are feeble” (Italics in original, ibid., p. 13). The experiences themselves are many and vary from visions and conversions to sensing awe in nature and the pouring of godly love.

The experiential and emotional dimension of religion can usefully be approached through the lens of Birgit Meyer’s notion of ‘sensational forms’ (e.g., Meyer 2006; 2008a; 2008b). Meyer approaches religion ‘as a practice of mediation that organizes the relationship between experiencing subjects and the transcendental via particular sensational forms’ (Meyer, 2006, p. 18). Especially in contexts of collective religious worship, sensational forms such as sound and music and various types of incense and visual stimuli collectively work to “tune the senses and induce specific sensations, thereby rendering the divine sense-able, and

triggering particular religious experiences" (Meyer, 2008a, p. 129). Whereas sensational forms of course vary from one religious context to another, they are typically employed to create a multi-sensory experience and to thereby induce particular sensory and bodily emotions and feelings among believers and/or practitioners (Meyer, 2008b, p. 707). As such, sensational forms also tend to be deliberately designed to strengthen aesthetic and stylistic affinities among individual believers, thus also supporting the forming of shared religious experience and identity.

As discussed just above, contemporary religious practice has become increasingly infused with popular cultural expressions, especially music. Music arguably possesses a unique capacity to activate the body and to affect emotional states, and especially when augmented by particular types of visual stimuli. The introduction of different forms of popular music and their associated sonic, visual and aesthetic into traditional worship settings inevitably brings notable changes to established sensational forms. Consumerist sensibilities can therefore be seen to have influenced these developments in that people have increasingly started to expect to be able to *choose* to experience religion in through the sensational forms that they prefer and that more firmly connect to their individual tastes and cultural sensibilities.

In addition, the experiential and emotional dimensions of many traditional religious settings have also become ever more influenced by broader trends in the area of wellbeing. For example, internationally spread meditation practices such as mindfulness and yoga have increasingly made their ways into traditional Christian settings, thus significantly altering not only the actual '~~-~~doing' of religion but peoples embodied and sensory experience of it as well. (E.g., Brown, 2018; Enstedt & Plank, 2023; Moberg & Ramstedt, 2023.)

4.3. The Narrative or Mythic Dimension

The third, narrative or mythic dimension is about the *telling* of religious stories and foundational myths (Smart, 1989, pp. 15-16.) These narratives can tell, for example, of the lives of significant persons, expound on the content and meaning of a good life or be historical stories that tell about the emergence of a particular religious group. The stories are often tied to religious rituals, as in the case of Christian worship, where biblical stories of Jesus and others are used to address and discuss contemporary issues.

Narrative, or the telling of stories, is also central to contemporary consumer culture. The rise of neoliberalism in the early 1980s worked to greatly advance and intensify already ongoing processes of commodity enculturation and dematerialization, that is, the process whereby the *cultural* and immaterial *symbolic* value of commodities increasingly takes precedence over their utility value (i.e., what they can actually be used for). (E.g., Arvidsson, 2006, p. 15; cf. Bell, 1976; Lyotard, 1986; Slater & Tonkiss, 2001, pp. 179–180). As a result, the practice of *branding* in its late-modern form has proliferated across ever more social and cultural domains while brands have gained a ubiquitous presence in our present-day 'attention economy'.

As Kornberger (2010, p. 10) points out, the wide proliferation of brands has not only fundamentally shaped how individual consumers engage with commodities. Branding as a practice has profoundly affected the ways in which businesses are managed internally. This can, for example, be seen in a gradual shift in emphasis from the branding of commodities to the branding of entire companies, including those who work in them. These developments have also served to spur the increasing normalization of branding practices throughout 'non-business' domains, including public agencies, non-profit organizations, and religious communities (Lury, 2011, pp. 143–146; Moberg, 2017). Indeed, as argued by Liz Moore, following these developments, the practice of branding needs to be decoupled "from simplistic ideas about 'commodification' and to reveal it instead as something more akin to a

managerial technique or recourse that seeks to use broadly 'cultural' […] materials for a range of strategic ends" (Moore, quoted in Lury 2011, p. 147).

The proliferation of branding has had a clearly observable effect on the self-perception, communication practices and modus operandi of many different types of religious communities. As an example, its impact on the narrative or mythical dimension of evangelical non- and cross-denominational 'seeker sensitive' churches is evident (Miller, 1997; Smith, 1998). Although usually conservative in terms of their core teachings, seeker-sensitive churches deliberately target the 'unchurched' and are generally characterized by a strong emphasis on the relationship between faith and personal transformation and success. They are typically also very closely aligned with contemporary consumerist and individualist sensibilities and frequently led by a charismatic leading pastor (Maddox, 2012, p. 147). As branding activities are viewed by some traditional churches as not part of their identity, they can still use them, but insist on not calling it branding, as in the case of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (Kokkonen, 2022).

4.4. The Doctrinal and Philosophical Dimension

The fourth, doctrinal and philosophical dimension is the *intellectualization* and *systematization* of narratives and myths into a more coherent theology (Smart, 1989, pp. 16-17). Today, it is mainly a literary affair, as complex religious doctrines surpass everyday communication, and often require years of systematic study to internalize them.

Again, accelerating processes of consumer culture-driven individualization have affected the ways in which people position themselves towards systematized religious creeds and teachings. In the 1980s and early 1990s, several US scholars started highlighting the impact of individualist and consumerist sensibilities on changing understandings of personal religious belonging and engagement and the particular doctrinal 'packages' offered by

different religious communities (e.g., Bellah et al., 1985; Hammond, 1992; Roof~~,~~, 1993; Wuthnow, 1998). For example, in the mid-1980s, Bellah et al. (1985, p. 20) found that US populations increasingly shared a 'common moral vocabulary' that they referred to as the "'first language' of American individualism". As far as peoples' religious commitments and sensibilities were concerned, Bellah and colleagues concluded (ibid., p. 63) that this had developed into a decision that 'must be particularly and peculiarly one's own'. Other scholars identified very similar trends. Wuthnow (1998), for example, identified a general shift in religious belonging and/or affiliation from that of 'dwelling' (i.e., staying in one religious community) to that of 'seeking' (i.e., continuously searching for a community that meet one's personal needs and preferences).

The intellectualization and systematization of religious narratives have also been greatly affected by continuous advancements in digital technologies. The global spread of the internet has, among many other things, given rise to what is often referred to as the 'digital ummah', or 'an electronic, networked Islamic community with a global reach enabling Muslims to connect with and impact both believers and non-believers' (Campbell, 2010, p. 31; cf. Bunt, 2003; 2009). As a young Finnish Muslims says:

> When I was younger, I would have gone to my parents or local imams. Now, however, I don't know if I'm wiser, but I would go to listen to those who have the best credentials and are available. Nowadays, you can find them from the internet and in Facebook, for example, Mufti Abu Layth, you can ask him straight. He answers within a week usually. However, I would look for a couple of opinions and imams. (Martikainen & Brekke, 2023, p. 7.)

As part of this development, there has been a proliferation of online *mujtahids*, that is, persons who claim the authority to engage in the interpretation of the Quran or the Hadith (*ijtihad*) and to issue online *fatwas* (a ruling on some issue based on Islamic law) (e.g., Bunt, 2003). This has engendered what could be termed a 'crisis' in Islamic religious authority (the *ulama*) as Muslims are increasingly able to exercise choice in matters that concern the interpretation of core religious teachings (Campbell, 2010, p. 109). The fact that many online

mujtahids have become international celebrities is reflective of a more general development whereby we now see an ‘‘‘inverse relation to the importance of [traditional and institutional] religious authority” (Lofton, 2012, p. 422) and a ‘democratization’ of the intellectualization and systematization of religious teachings and doctrines, or at least in the ways in which they are interpreted and actually applied in practice.

Such changes can also be discerned in other religions, including native spiritualities. Laurent Jérôme (2021), for example, highlights how Canadian indigenous groups use the Internet to present forgotten voices, narratives and myths as well as how the online world is used for the purposes of cultural renewal and social justice. Jérôme uses the concept of *mediacosmologies* to highlight how the online world has become an extention of social reality.

4.5. The Ethical and Legal Dimension

The fifth, ethical and legal dimension is about the *normative* aspects of religious thought and behavior (Smart, 1989, p. 17). The question is, how should the follower of a particular religion behave or be like, and what sanctions or benefits one has? The ethical and legal systems are quite different from each other, but nevertheless key for social cohesion in a group.

According to Jayeel Cornelio and Erron Medina, the contemporary prosperity ethic displays two distinctive key features: it is ‘*sacralizing self-help* and *celebrating consumption*’ (Cornelio & Medina, 2021, p. 65, Italics in original). Cornelio and Medina go on to discuss its combination of “spiritual renewal, wealth creation, and happiness” (ibid.) as an inherently individualistic endeavor. The new prosperity gospel thus differs from previous one that was largely miracle-oriented in that the new one directly draws on contemporary investment and

financial management practices. Its roots are in Pentecostalism and the New Thought Movement and often tangibly materialized in so-called megachurches (ibid., 65-67).

Well-known church leaders function as important mediators of such ideas. Such ideas are typically outlined in books, not a few of which have become bestsellers. They include Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Life* (2002), Bill Hybels' *Courageous Leadership* (2002) and Joel Osteen's *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Lining at your Full Potential* (2004). As Washington, Van Buren and Patterson point out, while the themes of such books range from 'intuitive topics of religion and self-help to the less obvious topics of organization and leadership', through the narrative of these books, 'the megachurch pastor's own life story thus enters into the vision formation process along with the life story of the organization itself and its members' (Washington, Van Buren & Patterson, 2014, p. 201). As part of these narratives, leading pastors are actively constructed as people with personal qualities and attributes worthy of emulation by individual church members and prospective members (Lanuza, 2017, p. 7).

Further supplemented by elaborately produced televised and/or streamed worship services and a wide range of other church-related products (e.g., courses, publications, online resources), such leading pastors therefore become central to what Mara Einstein has termed 'faith brands' (Einstein, 2008, p. 92). As Lofton (2011, p. 349) observes, in this way *celebrity culture* also enters into the picture as a central element of the ethics of megachurches in ways that increasingly come to shape 'expectations of religious leadership and its distribution and communication'.

Biard (2021) looks at post-Soviet, Islamic ethics and identifies two distinct types he names as Market Islam and Puritanical Islam. The Market Islam celebrates capitalism and its opportunities, but holds an otherwise conservative outlook on religion. Its focus is on the development of the individual, and it is not too keen on social or political projects. As Biard

writes, “Market Islam is not the prelude to the establishment of an Islamic state, but one of the vectors of the privatization of state, even the liquidation of the welfare state” (Biard, 2021, p. 81). The Puritanical Islam, in the case of Biard’s study the Tablighi Jamaat Movement, represent “a born-again type personal lifestyle choice which individuals can quit anytime without sanction” (ibid., p. 81). Market and Puritanical Islam are in certain respects not too different from each other as “[t]he consumer-oriented religiosity fashioned by the ethics of Tablighi ‘authenticity’ turns ‘proper’ Islamic consumption into a tool for constructing expressive identities and therefore intersects with the market logics of the neoliberal age” (ibid. 81).

4.6. The Social and Institutional Dimension

The sixth, social and institutional dimension is about the practical arrangements of *social formations* and *organization* (Smart, 1989, pp. 18-19). While the Church, the Sangha and the Umma are also imaginary, they nevertheless are embodied through groups of people acting for socially defined outcomes. Religious organizations, including international ones, are subject to national legislation, whereby their opportunities for organizational models are restricted law, as well as customary practices, both of which vary significantly around the world (Fox, 2008). Beside these they may have non-legally sanctioned, but religiously motived norms that *de facto* influence aspects of their organization.

Under neoliberalism, religious organizations face a range of new types of pressures that ‘derive from the normative and belief-centered nature of religious organizations, on the one hand, and the pressures they face from the institutional, economic, and social pressures from the societies in which they are located’ (Hinings & Raynard, 2014, p. 168) on the other hand. As previously explored by Moberg (2017), traditional and bureaucratically organized Christian churches have become particularly susceptible to these pressures due to their

continuing active civic engagements and cooperation with a range of public and third sector, as well as private organizations.

Neoliberal restructurings and deregulations have also significantly altered the broader opportunity structures within which religious organizations now operate, and especially in relation to new types of state-religious partnerships in the areas of social work and welfare provision (e.g., Martikainen, 2015). For example, the large interest towards faith-based organizations in the United States in the beginning of the 2000s reflected changing state policies as to how religious organizations could be used to implement new forms of welfare that was motivated by a broader effort to transfer state responsibilities to voluntary organizations (e.g., Ashley & Sandefer, 2013).

The megachurch phenomenon provides a particularly illustrative example, as Marion Maddox notes:

> Through and through, growth churches are closely aligned with consumerist capitalism in organisational structure, design elements, methods and message. Their buildings are consumer complexes, their theology is positive and anticipatory, and so forth. This is no mere incidental appropriation of the surrounding culture, but a conscious and consistent effort to align the church's activities and message not with any national culture but with the culture of global capitalism. (Maddox, 2012, p. 153.)

A megachurch is a cross- or nondenominational Protestant church, usually of a 'seeker sensitive' kind, with a membership exceeding 2,000. Organized more like businesses than traditional churches or voluntary associations, megachurches represent an increasingly common form of church organization in the United States in particular (Washington, Van Buren & Patterson, 2014, p. 189). Some of the largest and most widely known megachurches include Houston-based Lakewood Church, Lake Forest-based Saddleback Church, and Chicago-based Willow Creek Community Church (Washington, Van Buren and Patterson, 2014; Maddox, 2012).

4.7. The Material Dimension

Lastly, the material dimension of religion is about buildings, artefacts, food consumption, dress, art, and all other possible *material manifestations* of religion (Smart, 1989, pp. 20–21). The material dimension can also express belonging to a particular religion for outsiders, hence they are significant beyond their material form.

The study of alternative spirituality is full of examples material religion (e.g., Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; Heelas, 2008). Scholars have frequently highlighted how alternative spiritualities have become deeply entwined with practices of consumption, typically both disseminated and engaged with through the selling and buying of 'spiritual' commodities in the form of books, magazines, courses, counselling, healing-services and the like. The ways in which globally spread 'Eastern' meditation practices such as mindfulness and yoga have developed into integral parts of the contemporary wellbeing and personal development industry have also received a fair amount of attention (e.g., Purser, 2019; Enstedt & Plank, 2023).

As 'religious/spiritual' products of this sort are in principle available to anyone interested, some religious organizations have started to create strategies to protect their inner core activities for fear of these practices being appropriated by the broader lifestyle industries. For example, the Tibetan Buddhist Rokpa Scotland uses two ways to distinguish their internal activities from the more consumer-oriented ones: limiting access to different levels of teaching and controlling commoditization of its activities (McKenzie, 2013, pp. 166-167).

Zuzana Bártová (2021) discusses how the use of material artefacts in Western Buddhist practice highlights how it intertwines with social class. Buddhist paraphernalia is used to create the right atmosphere and aesthetics that is tied emotional regimes, which Bártová interprets from the perspective of social class. Thereby, "[i]f they wished to differentiate themselves aesthetically through clothing, accessories, and body modifications, they favored

matching their style to ‘commonplace’ social conventions, financial resources, and middle-class tastes” (Bártová, p. 40). This shows how even dedicated religious people mix their religious practice with general social consumption practices.

Another example of the material dimension is Islamic fashion. The rise of modest fashion is simultaneous with globalization and halalization of Islam (Gauthier, 2021). Sandikci and Ger (2011) go through the once stigmatized use of veil of it becoming a common view on middle-class women—and no longer less-educated rural ladies—and ties these developments to changes in Turkish politics and global Islamic changes. Further studies (e.g., Ajala, 2017) have shown that while persons choosing modest fashion do so for many reasons, the reasons are often expressively individual, thereby closely affected by consumer culture.

Even though commercialization and marketization of religion often becomes visible thought the material realm, including clothing, religious paraphernalia, media products and buildings, the neoliberal perspective highlights how all that is just the outer core, and the essential changes have taken place both in individual and collective imagination, as well as expectations and behaviour.

Conclusion

In this article we have used Ninian Smart’s dimensions of religion as a heuristic tool to illustrate our position in the ~~contemporary~~ sociological debate of the prime change dynamics among contemporary religion at large. While our illustration is a snapshot by design of various traditions and phenomena, we argue that they are also telling of similar and other changes that have taken place during the last decades. In our understanding the neoliberal impulse has been tremendously influential, though by no means the only development affecting societies and communities around the world. We understand the neoliberalization of

social life as a historical process that like any other historical social process has its beginning, counterforces and, likely, its end, as well as its long tail that wags. Thereby, we take distance from the modernist secularization teleology that assumes a notion of inevitable progress towards a predefined goal. Still, we see the neoliberal change and ideology as global in its scope, vast in its human as well as nature-related consequences and one that is still thriving.

For religion and spirituality, the neoliberal change is epitomized in the individualization and consumerization of religion and obviously has greater reach in societies with more affluence, and in which individuals are more—but not totally—free from traditional family-related bonds or an otherwise coercive society. This is not to say, of course, that people would no longer engage in the intellectualization and systematization of religious narratives, teachings and myths. Religious scholars and theologians continue to expound on the meaning and interpretation of the Bible, the Quran and Hadith, the Vedas, and so on. But as discussed above, the religious field displays a general tendency towards individualized interpretations and the application of doctrine and teachings in the here and now. This also has obvious implications for peoples' sense of religious belonging.

A final point is that the commercialization and marketization of religion is not a trivial development, but rather something that can change fundamentally religious and spiritual practice over time. Simultaneously as we argue for the recognition of these changes, we also acknowledge the historical roots, a path dependence in other words, of the current situation, and resistance of change among religious organizations, institutions and social collectives, as well as the thrill and excitement of consumer opportunities it raises among other actors. Therefore, instead of fully fledged neoliberal religion, we more often see influences, tendencies and subtle changes among religious thought and action.

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