

Relationality as a Systematic Theological Methodology

The Polarities of Being and Existence and the Dynamics of Identity in Unitarian Theological Thought

English Translation x

1. Purpose, Genre and Central Thesis

The habilitation thesis presents the candidate's scientific, teaching and professional development after the completion of the doctoral degree. Its aim is not to offer a closed monograph on the entire history of Unitarian theology, nor to replace a full historical dogmatics of the Unitarian tradition. Rather, it constructs a synthetic interpretive framework through which the candidate's postdoctoral publications, teaching practice and future research programme can be understood as parts of a coherent intellectual trajectory. The work therefore functions at once as a scholarly synthesis, a methodological reflection and a forward-looking research project. Its central concern is the movement from the theological-anthropological analysis of rites to a broader systematic theological methodology of relationality.

The core thesis of the dissertation is that the history of Unitarian theological thought can be interpreted not only as a dogmatic, institutional or intellectual-historical process, but also as a relational and polar dynamic. In this dynamic, Unitarian identity is shaped by the search for balance between the absolute and the concrete, the infinite and the finite, individuation and participation, dynamics and form, freedom and destiny. These polarities are not external conceptual oppositions added to the material from outside. They arise from the inner structure of the author's earlier research, especially from the diagnosis of ritual tensions in the doctoral dissertation, and from the subsequent broadening of those insights into a systematic theological horizon.

The thesis therefore establishes continuity between the doctoral dissertation and the present habilitation work. The doctoral dissertation examined the funeral rite in the Transylvanian Unitarian Church and in the British Unitarian movement in the twenty-first century. That research identified structural tensions between liturgical form and personal content, individual grief and communal participation, official ecclesial theology and local religious practice, public ritual and personal memory. In the habilitation thesis these tensions are not merely repeated as findings from ritual studies; they are elevated into methodological categories. The funeral rite becomes the point of departure for a broader question: how can theology preserve a living relation between its constitutive poles without allowing either pole to absorb or negate the other?

2. From Ritual Diagnosis to Relational Theology

The doctoral research treated the funeral rite as a complex symbolic unity. The rite was not understood as a simple sequence of prescribed actions, but as a meaning-generating space in which the individual, the family, the congregation and ecclesial tradition refer to one another. The funeral service thus appears as a relational event: it brings into contact the individual and the community,

past and present, memory and hope, form and meaning. The decisive insight was that the rite is effective only when these dimensions are held together in a living act of mediation.

One of the major findings of the doctoral dissertation was the weakening of the transitional function of the rite. In classical ritual theory, especially in Arnold van Gennep's model, rites of passage unfold through separation, liminality and reintegration. The contemporary Unitarian funeral practice examined in the dissertation showed that this linear structure has become fragile. The process of death, grief and communal reintegration is not always organized into a unified ritual arc. The funeral may still console, remember, create community and communicate theological meaning, yet it does not always carry the grieving person and the community through the experience of loss within the same ritual time and symbolic order.

This led to the concept of parallel heterochronicity: the individual and the community often do not inhabit the same ritual time. For the family, the funeral is an intense existential border-situation. For the wider congregation, it may be connected more to custom, social obligation or communal participation. The minister frames the event liturgically, the family seeks to represent the personal story of the deceased, and the community participates according to its own norms and expectations. The rite therefore becomes a meeting point of different temporalities, roles and layers of meaning rather than a single linear process of transition.

Closely related to this is the concept of ritual void. The ritual void does not mean a mere absence. It designates the tension-filled space that opens between the formal elements of the rite and their theological, communal and existential meanings. When the form of the service survives but the content attached to it weakens, a void appears. When the community participates without sharing the same meaning, another void appears. When the family's personal expectations and the normative forms of ecclesial liturgy diverge, the same phenomenon occurs. The habilitation thesis reinterprets this void as a theological space of possibility. It becomes the place in which new relations may be established between form and content, institution and experience, tradition and present address.

In this sense the ritual diagnosis becomes a relational theological methodology. The tension between form and content is transformed into the polarity between dynamics and form. The problem of individual grief and communal participation becomes the theological polarity between individuation and participation. The ritual void becomes the broader problem of relational theological space. The weakening of the transitional function of ritual becomes a model for understanding contemporary crises of identity and the need for theological reinterpretation. The central methodological question is therefore how inherited forms may be reinterpreted so that they remain living spaces of meaning, relation and identity rather than preserved but emptied structures.

3. Postdoctoral Publications and Original Contributions

After the doctoral degree, the candidate's publications developed in several connected directions. These directions should not be understood as an accidental accumulation of themes, but as a coherent movement from ritual and liturgy toward identity, analogy, episteme, relationality and systematic theological method. The first line of research remains closely connected to the doctoral

dissertation: studies on rite, liturgy and transition, including the published version of the dissertation, Symbol, Rite, Drama, and studies on the theological possibilities of liturgy and the elements of identity within the Unitarian funeral rite. Here the rite is already presented as a carrier of self-understanding, communal memory and religious identity.

A second line of research concerns transition, identity and communal self-representation. The studies on the ethics of transition and on memory in transition extend the ritual-theoretical basis of the doctoral work toward social memory, ethics and identity. The question is no longer only how a rite functions, but how a religious community represents itself in transitional situations and how memory becomes embodied in objects, practices and communal forms.

A third direction addresses analogy, analogy of being and univocity. The study of the image of God in the human being as an analogy of being gives the anthropological question an ontological and theological dimension. The human person is interpreted not merely as a religious subject, but as a relational existent open to divine being. The work on Duns Scotus and the predication of being examines how one may speak of God and creature without dissolving difference or losing the possibility of relation. The Protestant discussion of analogy deepens this problem further and helps to make the polarity of being and existence a methodological issue rather than a merely metaphysical scheme.

A fourth direction concerns existential temporality, *kairos* and factual life. The study of Heidegger's reading of Paul shows that faith is not an abstract conviction but a mode of existence that unfolds in time, decision, being-addressed and concrete life-situations. This is directly relevant for relational theology because relation is not treated as a timeless structure but as an event-like, historical and existential reality.

A fifth direction explicitly develops relationality as theological methodology. The studies on the possibilities of relational theology and on relationality as a methodological possibility mark the main postdoctoral movement of the candidate's research. Relationality becomes not an applied category but an organizing principle for systematic theology. The 2025 volume on the possibilities of a relational theology represents a synthetic stage of this programme and serves as a direct scholarly antecedent to the habilitation thesis.

A sixth direction deals with episteme and phenomenological archaeology. The central claim is that theological texts cannot be interpreted only on the basis of their explicit statements. One must also examine the tacit conditions of knowledge, the historical order of discourse and the cultural, political and institutional presuppositions within which theological statements become possible. This perspective is crucial for the interpretation of Unitarian theological history, since dogmatic disputes, political vulnerability, institutional constraints, Enlightenment rationality, romantic experience and modern philosophy all shaped the questions that could be asked and the language through which they could be answered.

A seventh direction concerns sacrality, beauty and aesthetic theology. These studies ask how transcendent presence appears within aesthetic experience and how beauty may be interpreted theologically. Aesthetic experience is not viewed as a self-contained subjective state, but as a

relational event in which transcendence, perception, form and meaning meet. An eighth direction interprets the modernity of Unitarian theology through figures such as János Körmöczi, Károly Böhm and Béla Varga. Finally, a ninth direction applies relational thinking to ethics, social ethics and public life, including questions of war, authority and identity in Central and Eastern Europe. Taken together, these publications show the originality of the postdoctoral research: the ritual void, the weakening of the transitional rite, the systematic reinterpretation of form and content, the relational understanding of individual and community, the application of the polarity model to Unitarian history, the use of episteme in theological historiography and the constructive potential of relational theology as a future research programme.

4. Teaching, Academic Formation and Research Organization

The habilitation thesis emphasizes that the candidate's development cannot be measured only through publications. Teaching, pastoral experience, research organization and ecclesial service are constitutive elements of the academic profile. Theological scholarship becomes fruitful in university teaching, in the formation of students' conceptual competence, in the construction of course materials and in the mediation of theological questions. Teaching is therefore not an external appendix to research, but one of the forms in which research becomes effective.

The candidate's teaching at the Protestant Theological Institute in Cluj began in direct connection with higher education in 2020. Before that, the professional path was shaped by more than two decades of pastoral, liturgical, administrative and community-building experience in Unitarian congregations. This background is decisive: the research questions did not arise in an abstract academic space, but from lived pastoral and communal experience. The funeral rite, grief, communal participation, liturgical form and personal memory were not only theoretical topics, but concrete realities encountered in ministry.

At BA level, the candidate has taught theological encyclopedia, confessional studies, ancient and modern history of philosophy, doctrine and ethics. These subjects appear diverse, but they belong to one broader pedagogical and scientific orientation. Theological encyclopedia introduces students to the internal structure and methodological map of theological disciplines. Confessional studies present the dogmatic, historical and communal forms of Unitarian and Christian self-understanding. Ancient and modern philosophy offer the conceptual preconditions of theological thinking, while doctrine and ethics relate confessional identity to practical judgment and responsibility. The aim is not merely to transmit information, but to cultivate conceptual and relational vision: students must learn not only what a doctrine, author or historical period means, but also how it relates to other doctrines, authors, disciplines and contexts.

At MA level, courses in philosophy of religion, social ethics and denominational studies are more directly connected to the research programme. Philosophy of religion provides the conceptual background for relational ontology and ultimate concern; social ethics develops the relation between individual responsibility, community, public life and the common good; denominational studies situate Unitarian identity within wider Christian and interreligious contexts. In teaching, the relational method takes concrete pedagogical form through seminars, student presentations, guided

reading, text interpretation and the connection of classical theological questions with contemporary ethical and social issues.

The thesis also outlines future research organization and doctoral supervision. Relational theology can function as a common methodological horizon for doctoral topics on Unitarian identity, ecclesiology, rite and liturgy, religious pluralism, public theology, social ethics, postsecularity and the relationship between theology and the sciences. Institutionally, this could take the form of an annual doctoral or MA-PhD transitional seminar, thematic conferences, research workshops and edited volumes. The point is that doctoral candidates should not receive only topics, but also a methodological orientation that helps them see tensions, mediations and polarities within their material.

5. The Methodological Framework of Relational Theology

The methodological framework of the thesis rests on several claims. First, theology must be understood relationally. Theological concepts do not receive their full meaning in isolation but in relation to one another. God's transcendence cannot be understood apart from historical address; personhood cannot be understood without communal participation; freedom cannot be understood apart from destiny, determination and responsibility; faith cannot be understood apart from tradition, community and present decision. Relation is therefore not a secondary connection between already complete concepts, but the very structure in which theological meaning emerges.

Second, theological concepts are structured by polar tensions. Polarity is not a simple contradiction. It is a relation in which the poles do not abolish one another but mutually condition one another. Theological problems often arise when one pole becomes absolute and excludes the other. If the absolute is separated from the concrete, theology becomes abstract metaphysics. If the concrete absorbs the absolute, theology becomes relativized. If individuation is detached from participation, faith becomes individualistic worldview. If participation absorbs individuation, freedom of conscience is endangered. If form suppresses dynamics, tradition becomes rigid. If dynamics dissolves form, theological content loses communicability and communal shape.

Third, theological crises are frequently crises of relational imbalance. The history of theology is not only a sequence of doctrines and institutional events; it is also a history of the changing equilibrium between poles. The present habilitation thesis uses this insight to read Unitarian theological history as a series of relational reorganizations. It asks where balance is preserved, where one pole becomes dominant, and how identity is formed in the attempt to mediate between the absolute and the concrete, the infinite and the finite, the individual and the community, freedom and destiny.

Fourth, relational theology is both historical and constructive. It is historical because it analyses concrete authors, periods, controversies and institutional situations. It is constructive because it does not stop at description. It asks how the insights of the tradition may be used to build a contemporary theological model. Fifth, relational theology is normative without becoming a closed system. It offers a criterion: it examines whether theological thought preserves the fruitful relation

between its poles. Yet it remains open because relation itself is dynamic, historical and event-like. The task is not to eliminate tensions, but to interpret them and keep them theologically productive.

6. The Dynamics of Identity in the Unitarian Tradition

The second part of the thesis applies the relational and polarity-based model to the Unitarian theological tradition. The question is no longer simply how being may be described in polar terms, but how these polarities appear historically in Unitarian self-understanding. The investigation begins with Ferenc Dávid, who is interpreted as the starting point of a relational Unitarian identity. In Dávid's thought, Unitarianism is not born merely as dogmatic separation, but as the search for a relation among God, Christ, Scripture, faith and the community. His theology gives early expression to the polarity of the absolute and the concrete: the absolute pole appears in the unity, indivisibility and transcendence of God, while the concrete pole appears in scriptural witness, the person of Christ and the historical community of believers.

Several key themes structure this early model. God is interpreted as a personal reality, not as an abstract metaphysical principle. Faith and reason are related without being collapsed into one another: reason serves the clarity of faith, while faith exceeds mere rational assent. Revelation and Scripture provide the concrete historical mediation of divine truth. The Christ-centred character of the tradition is interpreted through the notion of Christic existence: Christ is not merely an object of doctrinal debate, but the relational horizon in which divine address and human response meet. The concept of the Father also plays an important role, because it protects the personal, relational and communal character of the understanding of God.

The thesis then examines the first shifts within the emerging Unitarian tradition. In György Enyedi, history, morality and rationality become stronger interpretive poles. His work shows how revelation is increasingly historicized and moralized, and how reason becomes a tool for articulating a coherent theological identity. In Demeter Hunyadi, the emphasis on metaphysical distance reveals the weakening of participation. Anabaptist spiritualism is analysed as a form in which inner religious dynamism and individuation may become dominant at the expense of communal and doctrinal form. Socinianism is interpreted through rationality, the moral Christ and human responsibility. Each of these movements is not treated merely as an external influence or deviation, but as a different configuration of the poles that shape Unitarian identity.

The thesis also studies early polarity crises such as nonadorantism and Sabbatarianism. Nonadorantism narrows Christological mediation by accentuating monotheism in such a way that the relation between God and Christ may become reduced. Sabbatarianism strengthens law, identity and communal form, but thereby raises the question whether form can preserve living dynamics or become a boundary that limits theological openness. These early crises demonstrate that Unitarian theology repeatedly faced the problem of how to hold together the unity of God, the role of Christ, the authority of Scripture, freedom of conscience, communal form and historical identity.

The modern transformation of Unitarian identity is presented through Körmöczi, Kriza, Péterfi and Varga. János Körmöczi represents the interiorization of God: the knowledge of God is no longer approached only through external dogmatic order, ecclesial authority or metaphysical

concepts, but increasingly through the inner life of reason, heart, moral sensitivity and religious experience. János Kriza brings the dimension of religious experience and the theology of the heart into focus, emphasizing intuition, feeling and the romantic understanding of inwardness. Sándor Péterfi is interpreted through the world of values, in which theology and ethics meet in the question of meaning, formation and human vocation. Béla Varga marks a relational turn from value to grace: the issue is no longer only the philosophical structure of value, but the ecclesial and communal reality in which grace reshapes identity. The modern period thus shows a gradual movement from external doctrinal structures toward interiority, experience, value and grace, yet the central question remains the preservation of relational balance.

7. Contemporary Ecclesiology, Community and Public Theology

The third part of the habilitation thesis moves from historical interpretation to contemporary constructive theology. It asks how relational theology may address the crisis of identity in the present, especially in Central and Eastern Europe. The postcommunist context is characterized by uncertainty concerning authority, participation, community and ecclesial self-understanding. Churches often inherit institutional forms that have been weakened by historical trauma, political pressure and social fragmentation. In such a context, identity cannot be rebuilt through dogmatic rigidity or nostalgic restoration. It requires a relational reinterpretation of community, authority and participation.

The thesis analyses community and identity through the concepts of interdependence, *koinonia* and relational community. *Koinonia* is not simply sociological belonging. It is a theological form of shared life in which persons participate in a common reality without losing their individuality. The church is therefore interpreted as a space of encounter: not merely an institution, legal body or historical community, but a relational field in which God, the person, the community, tradition and the world meet. Ecclesiology must consequently be understood through relational dynamics.

Four key elements define the church's relational dynamics: hierarchy, freedom, participation and responsibility. Hierarchy is not rejected simply as oppressive, because every community needs form, order and continuity. Yet hierarchy becomes theologically problematic when it loses its relation to freedom and participation. Freedom is essential for the Unitarian tradition, especially in the form of freedom of conscience and personal responsibility. Yet freedom becomes empty if it is detached from communal participation and responsibility. Participation is the active form of belonging: the believer does not merely receive an inherited identity but contributes to the living shape of the community. Responsibility binds freedom and participation to the common good and prevents individuality from becoming arbitrary.

On this basis, relational theology becomes a constructive model for Unitarian theology. It makes possible a systematic theology that is neither dogmatically rigid nor relativistically diffuse. It holds together system and event: system is necessary because theology requires coherence, communicability and continuity; event is necessary because faith unfolds historically, personally and existentially. It also holds together objectivity and relation: truth is not reduced to subjective perspective, but neither is it placed outside historical, communal and existential mediation.

Relational theology can therefore support a public theology in which religious language enters social discourse without withdrawing into sectarian closure or dissolving itself into purely secular vocabulary.

This constructive dimension is particularly important for the future of Unitarian theology. The tradition must move beyond dogmatic rigidity, but it must also avoid losing its theological form. It must rediscover relational balance: between biblical witness and historical criticism, freedom and ecclesial belonging, rationality and religious experience, ethical responsibility and theological depth, individuality and participation. In this sense, Unitarian relational theology becomes not only a method of interpreting the past but also a future research programme.

8. General Conclusions

The habilitation thesis arrives at three major conclusions. First, the history of Unitarian theology may be interpreted as the history of the search for balance among polarities. The development of the tradition is not adequately described by a simple sequence of doctrinal changes or institutional events. Its deeper logic lies in the way it repeatedly negotiates the relation between the absolute and the concrete, the infinite and the finite, reason and revelation, Christ and God, the individual conscience and communal belonging, freedom and form.

Second, theological crises arise from relational imbalance. When one pole absorbs the other, theology becomes distorted. A one-sided emphasis on rationality may weaken mystery, participation and liturgical depth. A one-sided emphasis on inward experience may weaken communal form and doctrinal communicability. A one-sided emphasis on institution may suppress freedom of conscience. A one-sided emphasis on individual freedom may fragment the community. The relational method does not eliminate these tensions. It seeks to interpret them, to preserve their productive force and to prevent them from becoming destructive oppositions.

Third, relational theology can be developed into an independent systematic theological methodology. Its originality lies in the fact that it emerges from the candidate's own doctoral and postdoctoral research path: from the analysis of funeral rites and ritual voids, through the study of analogy, episteme, temporality, aesthetics and Unitarian modernity, to a constructive model of ecclesiology and public theology. The habilitation thesis therefore demonstrates not only a body of publications, but the maturation of a coherent theological method. It shows that the candidate's academic, teaching, pastoral and institutional work form a single intellectual trajectory.

The significance of this trajectory is twofold. On the one hand, it offers a new interpretive model for the Unitarian tradition, one that reads its history through relational polarities rather than only through dogmatic controversies or institutional chronology. On the other hand, it opens a future-oriented research programme for doctoral supervision and theological development. Relational theology can provide a common horizon for studies in ecclesiology, ritual, identity, pluralism, religious experience, ethics, public theology and the relationship between theology and culture. In this sense, the habilitation thesis is not the conclusion of a research path, but the systematic articulation of a method capable of generating further research.

