

The Diffused Religion and the Re-enchantment of the Western Civilization

By Dimitrios J. Bekridakis*

A. The Theory of the Cultural Diffusion

The concept of “diffusion” emerged in both the social and natural sciences to describe the process of dissemination and dispersal of materials and technologies, ideas and values, social practices and behaviors to the general population or among the population and social groups¹. In the social sciences, the notion of diffusion appeared in the late 19th century in the work of certain anthropologists and cultural theorists (“diffusionists”), who attempted to locate the “cradle of civilization”, i.e. the ancient cultural tradition from which all other traditions are supposed to have been influenced. As a part of this effort, it was assumed that various cultural elements migrated from the cultural center in which they appeared (e.g., ancient Egypt) and spread to the periphery through trade, travel, and conquest. This monistic view emphasized communication and understood diffusion as the dominant mechanism underlying cultural influences and changes in general. It was opposed by cultural evolutionists, who, influenced by Darwin and Herni Bergson, defended the independent diversity of cultural characteristics, which they perceived as autonomous and non-linear developments, emerging from within individual traditions². Despite objections of the leading

* Dimitrios J. Bekridakis studied Theology and holds an MA in Study of Religion from the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens.

1. See R. W. Perry, “Diffusion Theories”, in: Ed. F. Borgatta and Rh. J. V. Montgomery (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Sociology*, vol. 1, The Gale Group, New York 2000, pp. 674-681.

2. See V. H. Mair, “Cultural Diffusion”, in: M. Cline Horowitz (ed.), *Gale New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, vol. 2, Thomson Gale, New York 2005, pp. 587-588.

functionalist anthropologists (Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown), the theory of cultural diffusion was founded based on empirically documented research carried out mainly by the circle of Franz Boas's students and followers, without, however, acquiring any special status in the 20th century.

There are five core assumptions of this theory: Firstly, the diffusive elements usually undergo some modification during the process of their integration into a new environment. Secondly, the new elements' ability to adapt to the belief system of the cultural environment that accepts them is a *conditio sine qua non* for their acceptance. Thirdly, respectively, elements perceived as incompatible with the fundamental beliefs of the receiving culture are more likely to be rejected. Fourthly, an element's acceptance or rejection depends on its usefulness, whether it serves certain needs or designs inherent in the reception culture. Fifthly, cultural environments with a positive record of imported elements' acceptance are more akin to accommodating and re-facilitating processes of cultural diffusion³.

Further elaboration of the diffusion theory which was made possible by the sociological examination of different regions -especially the rural ones- revealed a series of features, that may prove to be equally useful with the above-mentioned nuclear considerations when applying this theory in the field of the study of religious ideas: a) the *observability* of the diffused ideas, concepts, and practices within the receptive culture; b) the *complexity* of the diffused elements, which constitutes a contraindication as far as the likelihood and breadth of their acceptance are concerned; c) the *relative advantage* that offers the adoption of a new, diffuse element over its non-adoption; and finally, d) the *trialability* of new, diffused elements, i.e. the flexibility and "elasticity" they possess to be modified and adapted to different cultural contexts during the stage of their practical application⁴.

Another worth noting aspect of the cultural diffusion theory is the one that refers to the sociological characteristics of those who are the

3. See Ann Stahl, "Innovation Diffusion, and Cultural Contact", *Journal of World Prehistory* 8 (1994), pp. 51-112.

4. See W. Perry, *ibid.*, p. 680.

first to accept and adopt diffused ideas and practices - *high socio-economic status, resilience* in volatile and uncertain conditions, *rejection of dogmatism* and fatalistic attitudes towards developments, a *high degree of social integration* and *familiarity* with digital media and social networks, and a constant search for information in the modern communication context. Finally, the *processes of copying and imitation* of attitudes and ways of thinking that are taking place in the subsoil of liberal mass democratic societies play an important role in the acceptance of diffuse information by the general public, as well as the complex reality of the multi-layered *social contagion* through the rapid transmission of information, ideas, feelings, symbols, concepts and beliefs that takes place within the post-modern communicative condition⁵. We believe that the anthropological theory of cultural diffusion can be extremely useful in examining the dispersal of religious elements (ideas, practices, etc.) since the latter are the culture's building blocks. The analysis of diffuse spirituality that follows takes seriously all the above conditions into account so that the concepts, ideas, and practices identified as diffuse meet the criteria set out by the cultural diffusion theory. We will return to this in the last part of the present article.

B. The Agents of the Diffusion: The New Religious Movements

With the term *New Religious Movements* (henceforth, *NRM*) or *New Religions*, modern religious research refers to a large number of groups, individual organizations, and networks of organizations having a religious character, that emerged from the end of the Second World War onwards, operating both in the countries of the so-called Western world as well as other parts of it, truly constituting a religious phenomenon of global scope and impact. In any case, this definition, which has as its sole criterion the temporal positioning, seems extremely generalized and vague. However, it has arisen almost as a necessity, given the enormous number, geographical dispersion, and heterogeneous nature of the

5. See R. W. Perry, *ibid.*, p. 681.

religious groups under consideration. These factors make it extremely difficult to find a more comprehensive and systematic definition that adequately captures the full breadth of the phenomenon. This does not mean, of course, that within this inhomogeneous set we cannot proceed to classifications. On the contrary, the relevant research has revealed a multitude of such classifications, based on common metaphysical beliefs and rituals, the acceptance or rejection of the society's values and principles by the new religious groups, or according to the degree of their members' commitment and the type of each group's organization, and their specific religious identity as systems of tropes and sub-tropes of the absolute⁶. For the present paper, however, we consider that a rough classification according to a common criterion from the relevant scientific literature is sufficient, concerning the particular religious and spiritual tradition from which the various movements historically emerge or to which they are related in terms of religion. Therefore, based on this criterion, we have:

I. New religious movements originate from the great *religious traditions of humanity* (*World Religions*), monotheistic and non-monotheistic, including those originating from Hinduism, Buddhism, and East Asia

6. About the New Religious Movements, their history, their interaction with the social reality of recent secularism, and the various classifications that have been proposed, see, for example, St. Papalexandropoulos, "Οι Νέες Θρησκείες: Ίστορική Έπισκόπηση και Συστηματική Θεώρηση", in: *Δοκίμια Ίστορίας των Θρησκειών*, Hellinika Grammata Publications, Athens 1994, pp. 143-179; "Μία Πρόταση Ταξινόμησης των Νέων Θρησκειών", in: *Κύκκου Μαρτυρία, Άφιρωματικός Τόμος προς τιμήν του Μητροπολίτη Κύκκου και Τηλλυρίας, Ήγουμένου τῆς Ἱερᾶς, Βασιλικῆς καὶ Σταυροπηγιακῆς Μονῆς Κύκκου, κ.κ. Νικηφόρου γιὰ τὰ πενήντα χρόνια ἐκκλησιαστικῆς του διακονίας*, Nicosia 2019, pp. 863-872; R. Wallis, *The Elementary Forms of the New Religious Life*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1984; Eil. Barker, "New Religious Movements: Yet Another Great Awakening?", in: Ph. Hammond (ed.), *The Sacred in a Secular Age: Towards Revision in the Scientific Study of Religion*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1985; Irv. Hexham & K. Poewe (ed.), *New Religions as Global Culture: Making the Human Sacred*, Westview Press, Boulder 1997; L. L. Dawson, *Comprehending Cults: The sociology of New Religious Movements*, Oxford U. P., Ontario 1998; Br. Wilson & J. Cresswell (eds.), *New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response*, Routledge, London 1999; G. D. Chryssides, *Exploring New Religions*, Continuum, London 2001; Chr. Partridge (ed.), *New Religions: A Guide*, Oxford U.P., New York 2004; P. Clarke, *New Religions in Global Perspective*, Routledge, New York 2006.

religions. Their dominant feature is meditation. Also, those belonging to Islam and Judaism's spiritual climate, where the emphasis is given on the mystical traditions of Sufism and Kabbalah respectively. Finally, there are Christianity-oriented groups, where messianism, apocalypticism, and the enthusiastic-revolutionary element usually predominate.

II. A second large family of new organizations is closely linked to Western Esotericism's underground but impetuous stream, which has a long history in the European continent and was revived in Europe from the 18th century onwards⁷. At its roots lie occult beliefs and practices such as witchcraft and divination, astrology and spiritualism, theurgy, and theosophy. As we shall see below, this context is particularly important because Esotericism's world-theoretical and anthropological concepts have been widely diffused within the contemporary spiritual environment and decisively influenced its formation. The *New Age movement*, which is well known and emblematic among the New Religions, is considered to have developed mainly and primarily based on modern versions and interpretations of the Western Esoteric tradition, and only secondarily influenced by elements of Eastern religiosity, which it has adapted and assimilated only to the extent that they are consistent with its esoteric presuppositions⁸.

7. A brief but very informative historical introduction to the tradition of Western Esotericism is N. Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction*, Oxford University Press, New York 2008. One can find an excellent systematic presentation of Western Esotericism W. J. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Bloomsbury Academic, London 2013. Finally, a detailed presentation of the phenomenon, with special reference to its modern manifestations can be found in the excellent collective volume E. Asprem & K. Granholm (eds.), *Contemporary Esotericism*, Equinox, Sheffield 2013.

8. This view has been thoroughly presented by W. J. Hanegraaff in his book *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*, State University of New York Press, New York 1998. Apart from this solid and analytic study, other fundamental studies regarding the New Age are the following: St. Papalexandropoulos, "Νέα Εποχή: Η Θρησκευολογική Ταυτότητα ενός Κινήματος", *Ἐξόδος/Exodos* 6, 10 (1991), pp. 17-29, and vol. 7, pp. 41-61; P. Heelas, *The New Age Movement*, Blackwell, Oxford 1997; N. Drury, *The New Age: Searching for the Spiritual Self*, Thames & Hudson, London 2004, as well the collective volumes St. J. Sutcliffe & In Sælid Gilhus (eds.), *New Age Spirituality: Rethinking Religion*, Routledge, New York 2014 and D. Kemp & J. R. Lewis (eds.), *Handbook of New Age*, Brill, Leiden 2007.

III. A third subcategory of new religions is the phenomenon of Neopaganism, which developed in the last decades of the 19th century and throughout the 20th century.⁹ Here we are talking about movements attempting to revive interest in indigenous and national religions discredited in the past as pagan and displaced by Christianity's prevalence. They aim at highlighting and exploiting the supposedly valuable "stock" of "superior", "natural" or "indigenous" wisdom, supposedly possessed by the ancient peoples - from the natives of the Americas and the shamans of Central Asia to the ancient Greeks and the Egyptians, the Celts and the Vikings. This subgroup also includes the domestic trend of returning to the ancient Greek religion of the Dodecatheon, or "*Patroos*", as its practitioners usually call it. Some of the fundamental features of this trend are an exalted image of the past, a nostalgia for the structures and values of the traditional community and collectivity, a romantic idealization of the countryside and the "*folk-soul*", a glorification of authenticity, naturalness, and primitive character, which traditional cultures supposedly had - together with all its well-known and non-excludable by-products in the field of ideology (racism, nationalism, intolerance). In the context of the neo-pagan fantasy, nature reassumes a sacred and mysterious character: from inanimate raw material, available for exploitation in the context of technical and industrial civilization, it is transformed into a living and pulsating divine totality that again claims human respect (Gaia Theory). The magical worldview is being restored and certain aspects of the latter are even being mobilized within the ecology movement to revive sensitivity and concern for the natural environment. In this way, the ecological argument hopes to acquire a metaphysical depth (Deep Ecology). At the same time, the feminine element is emphasized in an attempt for the Father-God's authoritarian and almighty figure to be pilloried and the supposedly

9. For Neopaganism, see, among others, St. Papalexandropoulos, "Ο Νεοπαγανισμός ως Νέα Θρησκεία", *Σύναξη/Synaxi* 69 (1999), pp. 23-28; "Νεοπαγανισμός και Έλληνικότητα", *Επικοινωνία/Epikoinonia* (April-June 2003), pp. 23-25, and the collective volumes M. Strmiska (ed.), *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*, ABC-CLIO, Santa Barbara 2005, and M. Pizza & J. R. Lewis (eds.), *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, Brill, Leiden 2009.

oppressive character of monotheistic religions to be annulled. To this end, concepts and symbolism from pagan nature and fertility cults are adopted. Father God is replaced by the Mother Goddess and theology is replaced by *Thealogy*, used to highlight the perceived feminine aspects of the divine: acceptance of difference, love, forgiveness, tolerance, and eroticism.

Another group of alternative movements is completely oriented toward psychosomatic therapy. Groups offering alternative therapies usually tread the precarious line between science and mysticism. They borrow elements from psychology, psychotherapy, or holistic medicine and mix them with metaphysical concepts and techniques from the field of religion. This results in a wide range of *Psycotechnologies*, i.e. alternative methods of self-improvement and self-healing, self-awareness, and self-actualization. Spiritual development, consciousness's expansion, and the manifestation of the divine potential latent within the subject are presented in this case as a goal in itself; however, they function as a means to achieve the real goal, i.e. to improve the individual's socio-economic status. For this reason, the relevant research has described the movements serving such goals as *Self-Religions* and *Prosperity or Well-Being Religions*¹⁰. However, the concept that puts spirituality at the service of prosperity is not limited to the circles of the followers of alternative groups but is also adopted by the traditional religions' believers. The well-known motto that reflects this logic ("The Best of Both Worlds") can be seen as the motto of the *postmodern consensus*, as it expresses the religious consciousness of the complacent Western consumer-citizen concerning spiritual issues. A kind of human being, that is, who thinks he can seek God and confront the fundamental questions of existence without risking his exile from the neoliberal value system, at the top of which is the market demand for profit, success, and happiness.

V. Finally, there is also a heterogeneous group of movements, that derive their identity from various secular sources, such as *fantasy literature*, cinema, and the internet, the cult of pop music, sports, and entertainment

10. Regarding this group, see the introductory remarks by P. Heelas, "Western Europe: Self-Religions" in the collective volume P. Clarke (ed.), *The World's Religions: The Study of Religion, Traditional and New Religions*, Routledge, London 1991.

idols, as well as the pulp fiction or journalism linked to the appearance of A.T.I.A. and extraterrestrial beings. In particular, the phenomenon of the so-called *UFO Cults* is of great religious interest, not only because it has a great impact on mass culture (e.g., science fiction films), but mainly because it encompasses certain typical religious elements, such as messianism and apocalypticism, the belief that human civilization is the creation of alien visitors, the notion that a celestial, astral-derived core is latent within the subject, etc.¹¹. All these are intertwined with the belief that science is the pre-eminent carrier of truth and the apotheosis of technique as civilization's supreme developmental stage - notions, as we know, that are pre-eminently modern.

All the above categories of N.R.M. are also represented -more or less- in Greece. However, this paper does not aim to present more specific data related to the N.R.M.s operating in Greece today - for two main reasons. The first one could be described as quantitative, as it relates to the fact that such detailed data simply do not exist or, even when found, are scarce. No independent large-scale empirical research has yet been carried out in this area, not even at the elementary level of recording the individual groups or statistically evaluating their breadth. The sporadic reports and studies, which can hardly be collected, are fragmentary, and refer to individual groups or perceptions, but do not proceed to an overall assessment of the phenomenon¹². The Church of Greece, for its apologetic purposes only, has already since 1993 compiled a list of "Groups Incompatible with the Orthodox Faith", as it labels it, approved by the Holy Synod, and includes 496 "Heresies" and "Para-Religions", according to the relevant documents' phrasing.¹³ However,

11. Regarding this group, see Chr. Partridge (ed.), *UFO Religions*, Routledge, New York, 2003.

12. Of the few such works, we mention the following anthropological study: D. Oulis, *Η Πνευματικότητα ως Υπόσχεση Εύτυχίας: Το Παράδειγμα του Μορφωτικού και Μή-Κερδοσκοπικού Σωματίου «Αρμονική Ζωή»*, (unpublished Dissertation), Panteion University, Athens 2010.

13. The relevant list was drawn up by the Fifth Pan-Orthodox Conference of Delegates of the Orthodox Churches and Holy Metropolises related to Heresies and Para-religion (Nafpaktos 13-15/05/1993) and was completed by the Seventh Pan-Orthodox Conference of Delegates of the Orthodox Churches and Holy Metropolises on Heresies and Para-

as it is obvious, neither this list nor the more anti-heretical literature of the Church circles on heresy can be used to draw safe scientific conclusions. Therefore, anyone who wishes to study the phenomenon in Greece has to start from scratch - in contrast, of course, to what happens in the rest of Europe. However, if the sizes and proportions that apply internationally are also valid in our country -and our perception is that they are indeed valid to a great extent- then we are talking about a few hundred new religious movements, which usually attract a small number of committed and regular members. Some other people are moving around this core, who either share some of the group's beliefs without further involvement or are in a phase of spiritual search and choose to try out the alternatives offered. In any case, however, all the indications are that the number of members of the N.R.M.s active in Greece is not large.

As far as each group's internal religious life is concerned, it could be observed that it is usually degraded, with few exceptions: sparse gatherings, anemic ritual aspects, loose ties between members, mobility, and interchangeability of ideas, practices, and even members, between groups – more generally, a fluid status. Similarly, the various N.R.M.s' public presence is extremely sparse, as initiatives at the level of political action and open discussion on various issues of concern to modern Greek society are more or less absent. Of course, this invisibility is largely due to the overtly rejectionist and hostile attitude that the Church of Greece displays towards the N.R.M.s, as well as to the media's -both print- and electronic- contradictory attitude. The latter, while they eagerly and

religion (Haliartos, 20-26/09/1995). The relevant list and the conclusions of these Conferences can be found on the website of the Church of Greece (<http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/committees/heresies/heresies.htm>). A similar list of 150 "heresies" operating in Cyprus has been compiled by the team of the Special Information Conference on Issues of Heresies and Para-religion in Cyprus (Holy Monastery of Trooditissa, 15-16 June 1996), in f. Christophoros Tsiakkas, *Νεοφανείς Αιρέσεις: Ποιμαντική, Κοινωνική και Νομική Αντιμετώπισή τους*, Athos Publications, Athens 2006, pp. 197-202. For a thorough critical evaluation of the Church of Greece's anti-cult discourse, see D. J. Bekridakis, «Ὁρθοδοξία καὶ Νέες Θρησκείες: Ἡ Ἐκκλησιαστικὴ Ἀποτίμηση τῆς Θρησκευτικῆς Ἐτερότητας», in: D. Magriplis (ed.), *Πολιτισμὸς καὶ Διαφορετικότητα: Ἐμεῖς καὶ οἱ Ἄλλοι*, Stamoulis Publications, Thessaloniki 2011, pp. 493-512.

methodically house and promote a series of diffused alternative religious ideas and practices (yoga, feng shui, astrology, holistic therapies, etc.), rarely mention the groups that supposedly represent and embody these ideas.

The second reason why our reference to the N.R.M.s operating in the Greek territory is completely brief, is qualitative: it is not the numerical data and statistical measurements that constitute the essence of the N.R.M.s, but the concepts and practices they introduce, as well as these ideas' diffusion within society. This dissemination is mainly carried out through the plethora and organized presence of the New Religious Movements on the Internet, where thousands of websites exist, which are either directly linked to them or propagate the type of religiosity they represent. As a significant part of humankind's life has now moved to the vast digital continents of cyberspace, the emergence of various religious groups in it (and, in some cases, only in it) is to be expected, because of both the ease of access and the innumerable possibilities offered for the global dissemination of their religious beliefs. As *online religions*, therefore, the N.R.M.s have turned into global virtual religions, significantly impacting the shaping of the religious consciousness of the billions of internet nomads. The importance of N.R.M.s lies in their functioning as sources and providers of diffuse religiosity. As Prof. St. Papalexandropoulos observes: “[...] the real measure of the power of the new religions is something beyond numbers. This measure is the degree of influence and molding of the diffused religious environment that they exercise, which is extremely great – quite often, in various parts of the world, greater than that practiced by traditional religions”¹⁴. This important observation reveals an aspect of the phenomenon that goes far beyond the issues that concern individual alternative organizations, groups, and movements. In the remainder of our paper, we will focus on this aspect, as religious diffusion has caused a broader qualitative change regarding the religious paradigm, i.e. the ways modern man perceives and approaches *religion* and *sacredness*. This constitutes a

14. See St. Papalexandropoulos, “Νέα Θρησκευτικότητα και Έσχατολογία”, in: P. Kalaitzidis (ed.), *Έκκλησία και Έσχατολογία*, Kastaniotis Publications, Athens 2001, p. 376.

radical shift in the religious paradigm, at least in Western societies, that primarily concerns the field of sacredness, as new places to locate sacredness come to the fore. This change contributed to the emergence (also in Greece) of a *new religious consciousness*, which, in turn, led to the prevalence of a *new religious culture*. In the analysis that follows, the term “new religious culture” refers to a *climate* of religious ideas, beliefs, and practices originating from diverse and sometimes contradictory spiritual environments, within which a wide range of cultural production, artistic expression, and commercial exploitation processes (literature, comics, cinema, music, visual arts, digital games, applications, etc.) develop, directly influenced by the ideas and beliefs circulating within it¹⁵.

C. The Diffusion’s contents: the liquid Spirituality

Historians and sociologists of religion have called this postmodern religious trend Spirituality, usually accompanied the term with the prefix *new*, *alternative*, or *progressive*, to differentiate it from similar past phenomena¹⁶. It emerged in Western societies after the end of the Second World War, yet globalization and the subsequent digital media

15. For aspects of the cultural production connected with the New Spirituality, see C. M. Cusack & Al. Norman (eds.), *Handbook of New Religions and Cultural Production*, Brill Academic Publications, Leiden 2012.

16. Analogous is the content of the term *New Religious Consciousness*, which was introduced by Charles Y. Glock and Robert N. Bellah, in a collective volume –innovative for the period of its publication– that they edited, bearing in its title this term: *New Religious Consciousness*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1976. Nevertheless, we prefer to use the term “Spirituality”, because, among other things, the former’s use is quite limited. For the “New Spirituality”, see G. Lynch, *The New Spirituality: An Introduction to Progressive Belief in the Twenty-first Century*, I. B. Tauris, New York 2007; D. Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2008; and D. Bekridakis, “Εναλλακτικές Θρησκευτικές Ταυτότητες στη Μεθόριο Μοντέρνου-Μεταμοντέρνου: Ή Περίπτωση τής Νέας Πνευματικότητας” in: D. Magriplis (ed.), *Κριτικές Προσεγγίσεις στον Όρθόδοξο Πολιτισμό: Όψεις του Έλληνικού Παραδείγματος*. A. Stamoulis Publications, Thessaloniki 2007, pp. 222-268. Yet, the most important study about “New Spirituality” is the two-volume work written by Chr. Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Vol. I-II, Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture*, T&T Clark, London 2005.

explosion have turned it into a widely accepted universal phenomenon. The N.R.M.s constitute perhaps the New Spirituality's most conventional religious aspect, in the sense that they feed, either explicitly or implicitly, with their various concepts and practices, the wider spiritual climate it constitutes. Therefore, the N.R.M.s can be perceived as *sources* and *agents* of diffuse religious ideas. They are signs and indications that something is changing within the religiosity field. But these do not constitute a real change. Undoubtedly, their presence in society represents an *indicator* of liquid Spirituality's resonance and diffusion within the social body. But it is not the only one - perhaps not even the most important one. What other spaces, perceptions, or behaviors can also function as such indicators will become clear as soon as we further focus on the analysis and significance of the phenomenon in question.

As we have already said, from the 1960s onwards a new form of religious culture emerged in the societies of the so-called developed world, coming to oppose both traditional Christianity and secularized modernity's atheism. The causes of this phenomenon are many and complex; nevertheless, two were the central *Events* (in Alain Badiou's sense of the term) that preceded and contributed to the radical devaluation of the past's world-view and evaluative stock. One was the so-called *Death of God*, the bankruptcy of the Christian metaphysical and moral heritage, and the consequent decline of the Church institution. The other was the *Crisis of Modernity*, the tragic dashing of the hopes raised by the humanist tradition, and the instrumental rationalism and empiricism of Modernity's technoscience. In the years following the Second World War, the immediate crisis of meaning that hit Western societies prompted young people in particular, as well as a significant part of the artistic avant-garde and intellectuals, to question not only Modernity's implications but its very structural parameters and world-view presuppositions. One of the outlets was to turn to alternative sources to seek fresh ideas, values, and ideals. Spiritual teachers and gurus' massive migration from the Far East and the subsequent transplantation of a plethora of Eastern religious concepts and practices to the West trigger the creation of a new religious climate. At the same time, strong currents of revival (more precisely: *reinterpretation*) of paganism,

mysticism, and occultism, which had been flowing underground since the 19th century and earlier, now came to the surface in a rush and fed the new religious consciousness with a multitude of nutrients. As a result of this explosion, hundreds of new religions were founded, innumerable seminaries began to function, centers for the new ideas' promotion were inaugurated, and communes and ashrams appeared. Above all, a *new religious culture and ideology* were developed, radically changing the way Westerners approached sacredness. What has now become important is no longer the membership in established religious organizations (Christian Churches), the formal participation in their rituals, and the uncritical acceptance of the doctrines of the faith that derive from it but the individual's constant spiritual search and its ability to choose from a wide range of freely circulating and abundantly available religious beliefs and practices to satisfy its particular spiritual needs and desires. This contributed to the transition from the *institutional religion* (in our case, Christianity) to *private spirituality*, which, over time, has been established as more suitable to the socio-economic and psychological aspects of postmodern utilitarian individualism. Indeed, the spiritual awakening we are talking about is an extremely complex and multifaceted phenomenon; therefore, it is very difficult to find a definition that satisfactorily and completely covers all its aspects.

However, the examination using the instruments of the science of Religion can isolate several common metaphysical and world-view axioms common to this fluid Spirituality. The monistic and holistic orientation in ontology, the hierophanies' anthropological focus, the individualization and "psychologization" of the religious element, the absolute privileging of mystical experience over institutionalized doctrinal formulations, the soteriology's epistemological quality, the eclectic relativism and syncretism in the use of elements from diverse spiritual environments, the religion's instrumentalization with a simultaneous emphasis on healing and the optimistic philosophy of history, are the main relevant axes¹⁷. However, the methodological foundation on which

17. For a more detailed exposition of the New Spirituality's axes, as they are perceived here, see D. Bekridakis, "Εναλλακτικές Θρησκευτικές Ταυτότητες", *ibid.*, pp. 241-253.

Spirituality is built is linked to the widespread diffusion of many religious concepts, beliefs, values, and practices. Diffusion is the social function that generates, sustains, transforms, and develops the phenomenon described as liquid *Spirituality*. Moreover, it is at the base of diffusion that Spirituality intersects and interacts with the postmodern socio-economic and cultural condition - it is shaped by it and at the same time reshapes it.

I. The first perception widely diffused in the environment of Spirituality concerns the claim for *scientific validity* - constantly and strongly put forward by all the forces of the new religious culture. By overstating its scientific validity, Spirituality demands that it should be separated from Religion. Not coincidentally, most N.R.M.s' representatives categorically reject the notion that they are "religions" and systematically avoid using this specific designation in anything concerning them. Suppose someone wishes to study these organizations' publications. In that case, he or she will find that they prefer to introduce themselves as therapeutic communities following a scientific methodology. At the same time, their relationship with religion -when accepted- is limited to the fact that they mobilize or improve upon some ancient religious ideas and techniques to enhance the healing and self-realization programs they offer. In reality, of course, what they are doing is simply restating a series of well-known religious beliefs and metaphysical assumptions in scientific or pseudo-scientific terms, to promote them as "modern" and "effective". It is essentially a processing and renovating mechanism of traditional material so that it can be used in post-traditional times and meet new needs and requirements, something that is perfectly natural and expected. As long as modern civilization recognizes the unity of technology and science ("Technoscience") as its *raison d'être*, as long as it accepts it as the only criterion available to distinguish truth from falsehood, right from wrong, and real from imaginary, religion cannot be saved unless it is hitched to the technoscience's chariot. In this way, the religious element is looking for a second chance to return to the fore and regain its lost cognitive and social status. Only now, science, instead of being an enemy, has become an ally: an instrument par excellence for the world's *disenchantment*, it is ironically assisting in its rapid *re-enchantment*.

II. A second pervasive tendency, very similar to the previous one, is connected with the categorical imperative of *utilitarianism*. In the new religious culture, spirituality must be beneficial and effective. That is to say, it must meet modern man's constant demand for practicality, visible results, and immediate solutions. It is no longer the old religions' metaphysical quests (e.g. Christianity's teaching on the fate of man after death and the salvation of the soul) that are of prime interest; rather, it's the immediate practical effects that the application of one or other idea or practice will have on the individual's life. This encourages religiosity's instrumental and utilitarian exploitation since faith is understood as a means of serving tangible, *worldly goals* (psychosomatic health and healing, personal happiness, professional and economic well-being, etc.). A religious idea's truth or method is judged by its *functionality*, by the effectiveness with which it can deal with a variety of psychosomatic problems and deadlocks that plague human subjects. This is also hardly surprising: as it unfolds within the most advanced technological civilization known to mankind, the new religious ideology can only be fully interwoven with the newest *technical spirit*¹⁸. It can only fully adopt its intrinsic evaluative premises, related to the fundamental demands of practicality and efficiency. Consequently, utility's pragmatic identification with truth permeates the entire spectrum of diffused alternative religious practices.

III. The third characteristic is the sensitivity shown within the diffusion of Spirituality context for the physical environment. This is partly because of the pagan worldview which, as we have seen, dominates this space and promotes an image of nature as the "place" par excellence for the sacredness's manifestation and appropriation. In times of acute ecological anxiety and environmental degradation, this concept constitutes an imaginary counterweight to unleashed technological growth, idealizing and celebrating what has already been lost: the

18. For a more detailed presentation of the modern technical spirit's concept and characteristics, see D. Bekridakis, "Machina Ex Deo: Στοχασμοί γύρω από τον Θεολογικό Πυρήνα της Σύγχρονης Τεχνολογίας", in: D. K. Geroukalis (ed.), *Μετάνθρωπος: Ζώντας σ' έναν ψηφιακό κόσμο*, Harmos Publications, Athens, 2018, pp. 109-182.

natural and the primordial. Nowadays, when nature's depletion tends to become total, and the very idea of "naturalness" has become meaningless, neo-paganism offers modern mankind a certain sense of redemption from the collective guilt he feels in front of the great sacralized carnage of modern times: "Mother Nature". Spirituality's ecological turn has enormous appeal to the masses, that they've been trained during the last decades by the digital mass media -to a criminal degree energy-intensive- in accepting to anything "green" as self-evidently natural, pure, and innocent. But it is becoming increasingly apparent to even the most skeptical minds that the rhetoric about veganism, organic products, renewable energy sources, and the theories about climate change, the greenhouse effect, etc., function as components of a *hegemonic exploitative discourse*, seeking to conceal the gradual impoverishment and exclusion of the economically weakest, and to ensure consumer prosperity of the financially powerful in the face of the imminent rapid limitation of natural resources. According to this view, *ecology* is nothing more than *techno-capitalism's* continuation by other means. A constitutive element of the postmodern ecological narrative is the diffused pagan idea of a re-enchanted Nature, as it provides it with metaphysical justification and an aura of spirituality; thus, it contributes to the easier acceptance by the masses of the new politico-economic plans for the profit-seeking destructive exploitation of the natural environment.

IV. The fourth aspect of the new religious culture's diffusion is feminism. Since its emergence in an era of sexual liberation and appreciation of female identity, the female presence has been prolific in the circles of alternative spirituality. But unlike what is usually the case in traditional religions, women's participation in the N.R.M.s was not passive. Numerous women writers, activists, and theorists of the New Age, whose work is now considered a classic in Spirituality circles (Helena Blavatsky, Alice Bailey, Marilyn Ferguson, Louise Hay, Barbara Brenna, Rhonda Byrne, Shirley MacLaine, etc.), while the importance of female sexuality is highlighted, usually connected with witchcraft, divination, neo-paganism, and occultism¹⁹. Thus, from its

19. For sexuality's importance within the cycles of certain important New Religious

initial stages, Spirituality took on the character of a religious movement that undertook to meet women's needs and desires, respect Women's specific circumstances, and highlight the feminine element, without stripping it of its sacredness, as *secular* feminism did. By transferring the contemporary reality of equality, emancipation, and the general upgrading of Women's role in Western democracies to the religious realm, Liquid Spirituality recognizes the value and uniqueness of women's religious identity and experience, thus avoiding many of the extremes and dead ends in which the contemporary feminist movement is trapped. However, by suggesting female identity's re-enchantment in the same way that it promotes nature's respective one, the new religious culture also offers a mythological framework capable of underpinning the understanding of femininity as a pole towards which all the tendencies of the postmodern consumerist condition converge. At their meeting point, the initially redemptive religious demand of (female) self-actualization is transformed through its diffusion in mass culture into the vulgar narcissistic advertising commandment: "unleash the goddess hidden within you", through the use of this or that product. In addition, crossed with postmodern "Rightism" and hypocritical rhetoric about gender identities, it feeds the reactionary hegemonic "*Woke Culture*" with blatant clichés about female empowerment. Thus, the insurgent symbolic potential of women's spirituality is alienated by turning it into a spectacle, giving Women's capitalist exploitation a sense of exoticism and mystery. In a perversely ironic way, within the diffused postmodern religious culture, feminism's definitive debacle is achieved through its complete domination!

V. The diffused spirituality's fifth element is *mysticism's evaluative appreciation*. The mystical experience is isolated from the other aspects of the religious tradition (worship, ritual, institutional framework, doctrines, and beliefs) and treated in opposition to them as far superior to them, as the only genuine religious experience. In this way, the mystical tendency, which in all traditions is just one of the currents feeding the

Movements, see H. Bogdan, J. R. Lewis (ed.), *Sexuality and New Religious Movements*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2014.

religious phenomenon, now becomes the absolute point of reference, cut off from the particular historical and religious context that gave birth and meaning to it, and is treated as the quintessential religious experience. The place of the many different mystical traditions, which can be found within the world religions, is taken in Spirituality's circles by *mysticism* in the singular. This term is used to designate a personalized inner experience of the divine, considered unique and common to all religions, identical in content and quality, irrespective of the tradition from which it comes, and, therefore, eternal and transhistorical. This diffused meaning of the term is now so widespread that it is taken for granted and completely valid. However, the history of religions clearly shows that this is a misunderstanding with specific origins. It originates from a hermeneutical approach, which understands monistically and holistically the *Upanishads'* religious and philosophical tradition (Advaita Vedanta), and was developed within the Indian *Neo-Vedanta* reformist religious movement. As an intellectual current that sought to recapture and enrich the long tradition associated with *Upanishads'* interpretation, Neo-Vedanta took shape from the mid-19th century to the early 20th century. It was exemplarily represented in the thoughts and actions of people such as the philosophy professor and second President of the Indian Republic (1962-1967) Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the great mystic Sri Ramakrishna, one of modern India's most respected religious personalities, his disciple Swami Vivekananda, the first missionary of Vedanta in the West and founder of the "Vedanta Society", as well as several other members of this particular organization, based in the West, but also younger gurus, not directly connected with the Neo-Vedanta movement but reproducing its thought, such as Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. A nearly identical interpretation of the ancient Indian thought was adopted and promoted by the *Theosophical Society*, which historically has acted as a precursor and pioneer of the New Age movement. In both cases, *mysticism*, as the empirical state of man's union with the Absolute, is elevated to the *common core* of all religions. Related to this is the assessment that: "all religions say the same thing" – an emblematic diffused religious idea, that broadly appealed to society. The unity with the deity emerges as the supreme good, to which every genuine spiritual quest must be directed.

This arbitrary view automatically downgrades the religious phenomenon's aspects (ritual, doctrine, morality), which are de facto different in each tradition, to secondary, superficial, often obsolete elements. Thus religion, a multifaceted historical phenomenon, richly expressive and varied, is reduced to a laboratory for the production of mystical experiences. The longing for ecstatic contemplation of the divine transforms the latter into a *technology of theosis*, as it traps it in the superficial logic of modern empiricism, which could be summarized as follows: "If I don't have empirical evidence, I don't believe, and I don't have empirical evidence if I don't have mystical experiences". In this view, however, *θεοπτία* (*theopsy*) is raised to the status of being the sole criterion of religious truth, which in turn marks religion's complete absorption by subjectivity. Because, ultimately, the *individual self* remains the only locus of "hierophanic" encounter with the deity. "Jatra Jiv, Tatra Shiv", asserted Ramakrishna, in a typically neo-Vedanta manner: "Where the human soul is, there Shiva is". Within the limits of the subject, the whole sacredness's dazzle is exhausted, far from the distractions and tropes of history: for the mystic, God's sight is Eternity's sight.

This essentialist approach to mysticism is self-designated "genuine" and "traditional", asserting self-evident and immediate acceptance. However, although it seeks to establish itself in past texts, it is a modern form of cultural criticism, a historically determined interpretation, i.e. (*post-*)*modern* par example; it presupposes modernity and is shaped by reference to the latter's *principles and aspirations*²⁰. This becomes immediately apparent if one considers what the anthropological presupposition of essentialist mysticism may entail for the modern subject's evaluative and ontological

20. This essentialist approach of important mysticism scholars (S. Radhakrishnan, E. Underhill, R. Otto, W. T. Stace, R. C. Zaehner, etc.), has been substantially challenged by Steven Katz from a relativist perspective, which has as its basic principle the fact that there can be no unmediated experience of the Divine, since the mystic always lives and moves within a specific historical, religious and social context. The religious tradition to which each mystic belongs largely determines the nature of his experience; therefore, there can only be as many different mysticisms as there are different religious traditions within which they are organically embedded. See St. Katz (ed.), *Mystical Experience & Philosophical Analysis*, Sheldon Press, London 1978; *Introduction to Mysticism & Religious Traditions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1983.

self-consciousness. According to it, insofar as the longed-for union with the Divine is achieved only in man's inner depths, mysticism functions as modern individualism's metaphysical justification. Thus, ironically, Spirituality emerges as the culmination and "extension by other means" (e.g., religious ones), of atheistic humanism's anthropology, i.e. of the Cartesian conception of the subject as truth's ultimate criterion, as well as the symbolic concept of the citizen, as it has been shaped in the Western tradition of liberal bourgeois democracy. Thus, the individual self becomes postmodern religious culture's "burning bush": it is there that the Absolute resides and manifests itself.

Therefore, the perception associated with the mystical experience's excessive outbreak largely prevails because it largely fits with the fundamental anthropological assumptions of mass culture, which, we should not forget, Christopher Lash has exemplarily analyzed as a "culture of narcissism"²¹. And since through diffusion, the latter has become dominant, it now also functions as a framework of self-understanding and interpretation even for the great ancient traditions (Christianity, Hinduism, Islam), where one could expect that there would be greater resistance against the tendency to internalization²¹.

VI. Unquestionably related to what we have said immediately above, is the sixth diffused element, the *religiosity's* individualization. The idea that the subjective self has absolute ontological and evaluative priority over the world around it is a widespread and popular assumption in the context of the postmodern cultural condition. Therefore, we could argue

21. In our country, this becomes immediately apparent if one studies modern Greek Orthodox thought, where the overemphasis on *mysticism* on the one hand and *therapeutism* on the other has become something like an endemic disease. It affects more and more Orthodox theologians and writers, clergy and laity, turning them into unintentional preachers and propagandists of the liquid Spirituality's diffused religious ideas. Thus, theology tends to be almost entirely replaced by "theosi-ology" and psychotherapy, which means that the ecclesiastical discourse as a whole regurgitates the hegemonic narratives of the postmodern neoliberal consensus, occasionally clothed in the mantle of "patristic thought", the "tradition of enlightened elders" and "Orthodox theology of the person". This allows it to continue to function as a laboratory of subjugated consciences, through the metaphysical justification of the established order of things – a function it has had in the past, albeit in a different socio-economic context and with a very different ideological stamp.

that it constitutes a diffused religious idea, which is not self-evident -as it is usually understood- but has a specific religious-philosophical and historical-social origin. Its philosophical root lies in the *individualistic* modern anthropology, as it branches out into *rationalism* (Enlightenment) and *voluntarism* (Romanticism). Its religious root is also twofold. On the one hand, it is located in the later Esotericism's intellectual environment, which elaborated and developed the cognitive concept of the divine spark that is supposed to be latent within the subject; on the other hand, it derives from the reception by the West of the Eastern (Vedantic) conception of the human existence's divine core, which unifies it with the impersonal divine universal *Essence*. However, it had to be scientifically validated and further theoretically elaborated within the discipline of Psychology in order to gain the enormous popularity and pervasiveness that it enjoys today as an emblematic diffuse idea, the absolute focus on the self²². This was mainly achieved through Carl Rogers' *Humanistic Psychology*, Maslow, Grof, and Sutich's *Trans-personal Psychology*, and the *Human Potential Movement*, which was extremely popular in intellectual and youth circles during the 1960s and 1970s. Through them, the absolutization - literally: *idolization* - of the human has taken place, so that in the context of the pervasive religious culture it is now seen as the sacredness' locus par excellence - "Higher Self", "Inner Self", "Pure Consciousness". This cult acts as the metaphysical foundation of postmodern *Therapeutism* and permeates all versions of the self-improvement, self-help, self-transcendence, and self-realization ideology underpinned by it²³. This ideology is widely disseminated through mass culture and entertainment, advertising, and consumption, infiltrating business and professional ethics, interpersonal relations, and education. Thus, a complete *psychologization* of life is carried out, which, in turn, feeds a hegemonic interpretation of human interiority and its

22. For the Psychology's role in Self-idolization and the cultivation of the therapeutic model in approaching human life, P. C. Vitz's insightful analysis remains more relevant than ever: *Psychology of Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship*, Wm. B. Eerdmans, Cambridge 21994.

23. For the modern *Therapeutism* culture, a thorough analysis is offered by E. Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2008.

relationship with the world. Its building blocks are the constant self-engagement, performance cult and efficiency imperative; the normalization of whimsy, and the demand for diversity's unconditional acceptance in all its manifestations and forms. These conceptions are developed as elements organically embedded in the postmodern cultural and socio-economic consensus's broader environment (defined by mass post-democracy and digital neoliberalism); they feed it and are simultaneously fed back by it. In other words, they constitute a framework of the established order's metaphysical justification. It is to this diffused spirituality's most important function that we intend to return.

The idea that the individual is the supreme cognitive and evaluative measure of all things and the sacredness's supreme "locus", with the divine, among other things, dwelling within it, also leads to the religious life's deregulation. It contributes to its gradual removal from the institutionally established religious community ("Believing without Belonging"). In the name of autonomous, non-aligned, and self-reliant interiority, all external authority is devalued; every rule and doctrine, given from above (or better: from without), is rejected. Mediation in the relationship with the divine is directly denounced as an attempt at manipulation and oppression by the various priesthoods. Thus, religion, erstwhile an expression of a social body's collective consciousness and common faith, is transformed into a private affair. It tends to be either a personal artifact (*à la carte Religion*), something like a "user-friendly" digital application, based on the model of consumer and entertainment applications for smartphones, or a field for the private commercial identity's expression (*MyReligion*, modeled to the online corporate *MyAccount*). As we've already said, the parts and materials of this construction come from various spiritual environments that are freely diffused throughout the social space. From their colorful abundance, individuals choose those that suit their taste or needs and assemble their religion - or, more precisely, their private *simulation* of religion. However, because individual tastes, needs, and desires change frequently and at will, private spirituality is crude and untested in its strength construction. It is a daily negotiable, unstable product, subject to constant reform - quite literally, a *Liquid Religion*. The widespread contemporary "do-it-yourself" logic, especially on the Internet, perfectly

facilitates religious decentralization (Do-It-Yourself Religion) and promotes *the religious experience's democratization*. At the same time, however, it promotes the commercialization and consumerization of the religious phenomenon's every single aspect to the highest degree²⁴.

VII Diffusion's seventh element is related to the fact that the individual choice's arbitrariness and the possibility of constructing private types of religiousness can only thrive in environments of communicative *openness*, cultural *pluralism*, and religious *diversity* – i.e. in *Digital Networking*, *Globalization*, and *Cosmopolitan* environments²⁵. Characterized by transformations, alternations, enrichments, and various contradictions, Liquid Spirituality is inherently anti-authoritarian, anti-dogmatic, and spontaneous. It abhors fanatical adherence to rules and rejects any coercive tendency to manipulation or submission to authority – hence, it is extremely suspicious of the various priesthoods (first and foremost that of the Christian Church, against which Spirituality has a particular rage) and their claim to mediate in people's communication with the divine. On the contrary, it wants to be inclusive and hospitable to the "Other", pluralistic, and reconciliatory. That is why the function of diffusing religious and cultural elements and ideas takes the place of the circulatory system in its organization, which keeps it alive. Free from obligations of affiliation, loyalty, or the exclusive possession of the truth, it rewards change and conversion and proves to be a form of religiosity with a flag of convenience, utterly opportunistic and unreliable. It is no coincidence that it systematically cultivates the secular perception of the

24. The accuracy with which some brands or advertising *mottos* convey the internal "logic" (intentionality and rhetorical structure) of the postmodern religious experience is surprising. The rationale is based on an eclectic affinity, whose axis is the spirituality's *commercialization*. Since religiosity is constructed and experienced as a product for private consumption, what better way to convey its market "spirit" than a commercial *slogan*?

25. The relation between religious pluralism and cultural polyphony has been highlighted by St. Papalexandropoulos, see "Πολυπολιτισμικότητα και Πολυθρησκευτικότητα", in: *Φιλία και Κοινωνία, Τιμητικός Τόμος στον Καθηγητή Γρηγόριο Δ. Ζιάκα*, Vanias Publications, Thessaloniki 2008, pp. 415-438. Indicative of the concepts of tolerance and multiculturalism's ideological and political implications, see S. Zizek, *Tolerance as an Ideological Category* (<http://www.lacan.com/zizek-inquiry.html>) and *Liberal Multiculturalism masks an old Barbarism with a Human Face* (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/oct/03/immigration-policy-roma-rightwing-europe>).

equality-*equivalence of religions* and maintains that all religious traditions are equal - they are different paths leading to the same absolute summit, where the impersonal divine is located. At the cultural, linguistic, doctrinal, ritual, and symbolic levels, there is undeniably enormous diversity; still, these elements are considered superficial, variable, and insignificant. On the contrary, at the deeper and more authentic level, which, as we have seen, is considered to be that of direct, mystical experience, all traditions are considered equally valuable and capable of providing access to the transcendent. This is why Liquid Spirituality's symbolic stock of "orthodoxy" and "heresy", or the notion of apostasy, of moving from one religious tradition to another, are absent; they do not exist, because apostasy and heresy have become the norm: it is the conscious commitment to one tradition that is now considered problematic and vilified as fanaticism, while the constant movement from one tradition to another or the syncretic selection of elements from different traditions is considered as perfectly normal, if not obligatory, practice. Likewise, missionary consciousness, the zeal for the faith's transmission, is completely absent. Faiths are no longer annunciated (*testimony*) at a heavy personal cost (*martyrdom*) but sold at a huge personal profit since the environment in which they are circulated is one of extravagant consumption: a huge supermarket of religious ideas, beliefs, and practices²⁶. Therefore, everything related to spiritual matters is perceived as open-ended, and all preferences of the postmodern *homo religiosus* are admitted from the outset. The only claim not allowed to be made or accepted, the only path that leads nowhere, is the claim to the exclusive possession of Truth. Thus, the relativistic and pluralistic approach to religious traditions proves to be highly selective and biased, accepting only those elements it considers to be in line or compatible with the demand for tolerance and coexistence while discrediting all the rest as "fanatical" or "obsolete". In other words, it accepts the different traditions to the extent that they will cease to be different, exorcise their radical otherness and alterity, and adopt relativistic logic as an article

26. J. Carrette, R. King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*, Routledge, New York 2005, p. 123 et seq., is an extremely insightful analysis of the commercialization as a constitutive element of the alternative Spirituality.

of faith. Inevitably, such an approach ends up in syncretism. Elements from various religious traditions and spiritual environments are selected and isolated from their historical and social context and mixed at will with others that are completely different or even contradictory. This aims to produce completely liquid and flexible forms of hybrid religious identities, adapted to the subject's needs and desires. Thus, the pervasive spiritual culture bears in its very construction the stamp of the market consumer ethic, since it is the offspring of an era in which the concept of the free market has taken on mythical dimensions, leading to life's complete commercialization. It should not be overlooked that the religious traditions' relativistic treatment is fully compatible with the hegemonic rhetoric of *tolerance* and unconditional acceptance of otherness that governs the postmodern ideological convention, and which in practice (i.e., regardless of its various actors and spokespersons' intentions) serves the supranational interests of neoliberal economic and political elites. It is therefore an essentially political conception, which, although at first sight it appears progressive and with democratic sensibilities, in practice, it is a totalitarian one, as it leads to fanaticism and the manipulation of the masses. For, in its ideological use, any claim to uniqueness, exclusivity, and consistent commitment to what is perceived as absolute or true is denigrated as fanaticism, intolerance, and irrationality. At the same time, however, it escapes our attention that ideological adherence to the normative relativization of everything is equally fanatical, intolerant, and irrational - especially when it assumes hegemonic dimensions and dictates policies. The difference is that postmodern relativism's fanaticism serves the diverse interests of neoliberal globalization. At the same time, the one associated with the religious particularism's dismantling seems to serve national, and local interests.

In other words, the politically correct ideology of tolerance, to the extent that it permeates the sphere of culture and seeks to impose itself on the social field as a self-evident value, does nothing more than introduce a secularized form of absolutization (*holism*), which takes the place of the religious absolutizations it seeks to eliminate.

D. The Diffusion's result: Occultism's mass culture

All of the above indicates, in our view, that during the second half of the 20th century a qualitative Paradigm shift (according to Thomas Kuhn's formulation) is underway in the field of religion and religiosity: a radical change in how modern man perceives and approaches the Divine. In summary, four are the fundamental cultural features of this new religious paradigm, which bears, as we have said, the stamp of a diffused Liquid Spirituality:

Firstly, and obviously, we are talking about a post-Christian form of religiosity since it is articulated from all points of view at the antipodes of the Christian world-theoretical datum and the ecclesiastical organism - which it both expressly detests and rejects. At the same time, it profoundly influences the formation of the contemporary Christian consciousness, preparing the theoretical ground for the definitive reinterpretation of Christianity based on axes that are clearly extra-Christian (post-Christian Christianity).

Secondly, it is a *post-modern religious culture*, in the sense that it absolutely presupposes Modernity's structures and values, but at the same time transcends them, by shifting their internal flows toward novel (i.e., post-modern) directions.

Thirdly, paradoxical as it may seem, it is a *post-religious* religiosity, in the sense that it breaks through traditional religious forms and favors multiplicity and hybridity in the spiritual quest, moving on the blurred borderline between the religious and the secular. It rejects religions' institutional realizations, along with priesthoods, ritual rites, and closed systems of prefabricated ceremonies that make up the religious organization. This is why we in this paper we are talking about "Spirituality" and not "Religion", and indeed "Liquid" Spirituality: unstable and chimerical, changeable and polymorphous.

Finally, it is a *post-secularized religiosity*, since, as contradictory as it may seem²⁷, it is a (sub)product of modern secularization, while it simultaneously

27. For a more detailed presentation of Liquid Spirituality's four cultural qualities, see D. Bekridakis, "Εναλλακτικές Θρησκευτικές Ταυτότητες", *ibid.*, pp. 222-268.

represents its *de facto* transcendence; it presupposes and affirms secularized valorization, but in a religious way – through the disenchantment’s re-enchantment.

Those remarks demonstrate that Liquid Spirituality represents and promotes religiosity types perfectly adapted and compatible with the prevailing conditions in the postmodern mass post-democracies. It echoes and metaphysically justifies the collective ontological, cognitive, evaluative, ideological, and economic presuppositions of the self-proclaimed “open societies”, which shape the dominant ideology and culture and are embodied in the innumerable performative and micro-ritual acts of everyday life (individual freedoms and human rights, autonomy and self-determination, relativism and pluralism, scientism and the technical spirit’s dominance, neoliberal financial casino capitalism and instrumental utilitarianism, consumerism and ecological sensibilities, etc.). While Liquid Spirituality started as a revolutionary movement in its early stages (during the 1960s and 1970s), expressing a genuine demand for liberation from the shackles of institutional Christianity and the hypocritical conventions of bourgeois liberalism, it has nowadays become the most conservative and compromised worldview in the field of religious consciousness. It has simply replaced the old -now dead- dogmatism and moralism of the Church with a new dogmatism, that of syncretism, and a new moralism, that of neoliberal consensus. In this way, it offers a *new universal mythology* to a culture which in the past has rejected -and that is why it is so urgently needed in the present- the mythical element. To use different terminology, it comes to offer the globalized world *a new religious narrative* regarding self-meaning and the value of life and subjectivity. Yet, as we have seen, this is not a static and fixed narrative. On the contrary, it is a *religious discourse* whose narrative framework is characterized by maximum flexibility, permeability, and diversity, constantly evolving and developing. It functions as a communicative condition since it is structured in such a way as to provoke interaction and adopt diversity and innovation. It does not narrow boundaries, intended to exclude or restrict difference; it is developed as a receptor and multiplier of diversity and pluralism.

Consequently, we could understand Liquid Spirituality as *the postmodern mode of religion par excellence*; it is the pulsating religious heart of the

postmodern cultural condition. This is evidenced by the enormous diffusion of alternative religious ideas in all areas of society, from education and health to art and the entertainment industry, and from the internet to sport. The thousands of titles of books on “alternative” subjects (Yoga, Feng Shui, Homeopathy, self-help and self-realization, various forms of psychosomatic healing, meditation, channeling, positive thinking, Magic, Tarot, astrology, etc.), most of which have extremely high sales, countless films and TV series with high television ratings, multiplying special magazines in the alternative field and innumerable websites, the comics, music and video-games that form youth’s cultural ecology, the hundreds of seminars, spiritual meetings, and therapy sessions that attract a significant number of participants, who are willing to pay considerable sums of money, combined with the activity of the New Religious Movements, discussed above, are important indicators of the new religious ideology’s strong penetration in mass culture and spectacles²⁸. In its turn, this penetration intensifies religious pluralism and deregulation, facilitating the creation of new trends and formulations, feeding back in the Spirituality’s environment. In a way, diffuse Spirituality shapes mass culture and at the same time is reflexively reshaped by it.

Therefore, due to its pluralistic nature, Liquid Spirituality is not another multireligious vector; it is multi-religiousness incarnate. It is *religious pluralism* enveloped in the *aura of sacredness, religious diffusion, coexistence, interaction, and diversity elevated to religion*. It is the privileged space for the development of multiple, fluid, and changing religious identities. It

28. For the religious symbolic and worldview repository’s penetration in the various mass culture manifestations, see J. C. Lyden, Er. M. Mazur (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*, Routledge, New York 2015. More specifically, for music, we select indicatively from the extensive relevant bibliography Chr. Partridge’s excellent study, *The Lyre of Orpheus: Popular Music, the Sacred and the Profane*, Oxford University Press, New York 2014, and the very informative collective volume, Chr. Partridge, M. Moberg (eds.), *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Popular Music*, Bloomsbury Academic, London 2017. In the Greek research on the penetration of spirituality in mass culture, important contributions are D. G. Oulis, *Ο Διάβολος στο Celluloid: Έξορκισμοί, Πνευματικός Κόσμος και άλλα Άνθη του Κακού στις ταινίες Υπερφυσικού Τρόμου του Χόλλυγουντ*, Harmos Publications, Athens 2024; Io. Xidakis, *Τò Καλό και τò Κακό στòν Κόσμο τών Βιντεοπαιχνιδιών*, (unpublished PhD), National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens 2018.

is admittedly a very peculiar and idiosyncratic religious culture, in that it approaches other traditions in a selective, relativist, and ironic manner while simultaneously making relativism, eclecticism, and irony the basic principles of its *credo*. In seeking to escape the dogmatism of established religious institutions, it is led to the *meta-dogmatic dogmatism* of a liquid religious composition. Consequently, that which was abominably expelled from the door crept in through the window. After at least three centuries of Secularization, religious totalitarianism has returned to the societies of the Western world, wearing the mask of digital polytheism. This return constitutes an organic part of a more general trend towards the imposition of postmodern forms of tyranny at all levels, especially in politics, which nevertheless are not similar to the old tyrannies, even if they are much more brutal and insidious.

As far as its religious identity is concerned, we've already seen that the giant stream of diffused religious culture circulates abundant elements, related to or directly derived from the tradition of *modern Western Esotericism*. Christopher Partridge has called this complex cultural environment by the peculiar term *Occulture*²⁹. The new element in this postmodern manifestation of Esotericism-Occultism, the great difference from other past versions of it, is that now it is no longer a marginal trend, it does not concern a closed circle of initiates, some groups that move on the fringes of the subculture with a particular affinity for mysticism. On the contrary, it is a culturally dominant trend, since it is widely diffused through mass culture and global digital networking. Partridge epigrammatically expresses it with the phrase: "Occulture is Ordinary"³⁰.

These ideas, beliefs, values, tendencies, and behaviors making up this culture, have enormous currency and recognition across all aspects of everyday life in Western societies. But why is this the case? The main reason for their success is linked to the fact that, according to the theory of cultural diffusion, they meet all the necessary conditions facilitating their acceptance, which we saw in the introduction of this paper. They are *flexible* religious elements, easily modified and adapted to different social and cultural contexts. Consequently, they are *highly*

29. See Chr. Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, vol. 1, *ibid.*, pp. 63-184.

30. See Chr. Partridge, "Occulture is Ordinary", in: E. Asprem, K. Granholm, *ibid.*, p. 119.

compatible and *useful* for those who adopt them: they are accepted as appropriate spiritual tools serving specific goals (self-realization, healing, happiness, success, etc.). Moreover, their dissemination is facilitated first and foremost by their *simplicity* – how easily diffuse ideas can be formulated as (commercial) slogans, e.g. “Explore your Inner Self”, “Get Enlightened”, “Impossible is Nothing”; and secondly, by the type of society to which they are addressed, that of the Western-style liberal bourgeois (post)democracy, which is *tolerant* and *open* to the circulation of ideas and practices, especially in the current prevalent cosmopolitan and globalized conditions. The citizens of these societies are presumably of a higher standard of living than the majority of the world’s citizens and have a long tradition of *tolerance* toward diversity and *acceptance* of new ideas. After almost three centuries of modern Secularism and uninterrupted techno-scientific progress, they willingly reject dogmatism and obsession with the past values and norms, which they consider obsolete and an obstacle to development. They have been educated to be *resistant* to change and innovation, but also to constantly seek innovation in all fields, including that of religion and spirituality. Mass culture and powerful digital networks guarantee the visibility of esoteric/apocryphal ideas (literally, they make the otherwise occult universally visible!) so that the latter are contagiously diffused in the social body and form a regime of *imitation* and universal *consensus*.

Through this process, the Western world’s hegemonic religious narratives emerge, and, in their turn, they become structural elements of the subjects’ *Lifeworld*. In Husserl’s phenomenology, the term “*Lebenswelt*” (“Lifeworld”) entails the subjective construction of the meaning of reality. The elements of consciousness are not mere ideas or theoretical developments; they are experienced performances, linked to meanings, interpretations, and perceptions derived from the wider cultural, religious and social environment of the subject, processed and assimilated creatively by it in order to form his or her self. In short, “Lifeworld” synthesizes the subjective perception of objective reality as lived experience; thus, it is related to the anthropological concept of *Habitus* (Pierre Bourdieu). According to Habermas’ communication theory, the subjective “Lifeworld” constitutes a framework of voluntary

compliance and agreement with the hegemonic narrative. This is because it is the field where the subjects are exposed to the power's ideological imperialism, which through media propaganda and mass culture platitudes manipulates consciousness and works out consensus³¹.

In the same way, the dominant religious culture's diffuse religious ideas we've already described (Occulture) trigger processes that contribute to the formation of an individual religious identity that is liquid as far as its elements are concerned but esoteric regarding its general orientation. Liquid Spirituality now functions as a *framework for reinterpreting* the religious phenomenon as a whole. Therefore, it inevitably sets the conditions for the traditional institutional religion's (in Greece's case, Orthodoxy) reinterpretation, influencing indirectly but catalytically the way its members understand and experience their faith. More specifically, it affects the way the Church itself theologizes and perceives its faith, place, and mission in history. We are not talking here about a de-Christianization process, but rather a re-Christianization one, in the sense that Christianity itself is being redefined in terms of its religious identity. This means that the diffuse Spirituality's axial parameters (mysticism, psychologism, scientism, utilitarianism, therapeutism, individualized religiosity, eco-paganism, re-enchanted feminism, syncretic pluralism, eclecticism) now constitute a significant part of the religious experience and expression of a large proportion of those who identify themselves as "Christians" – regardless of their denominational affiliation. A glance at the popular religiosity circulated through the media, and at the popularized psychotherapeutic pseudo-theology that floods the bookstore shelves is enough to prove the point.

Therefore, Liquid Spirituality by and large sets the terms for the radical interpretation of Christianity –Western world's great religious tradition– and these are heteronomous ones: liquid postmodern Christianity is now understood based on pagan, esoteric, occult –and East Asian– concepts. In many ways, it has evolved into a purely post-Christian Christianity.

31. For the concept of *Lebenswelt* and its relation to the processes of subjective identities' formation see H.-H. Gander, *Self-Understanding and Lifeworld: Basic Traits of a Phenomenological Hermeneutics*, translated into English by R. T. Drake & J. Rayman, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2017.

To conclude: the once secularized and disenchanting Western civilization is undergoing a dynamic and rapid *de-secularization* and *re-enchantment*. However, the religion that is carrying out this re-enchantment is no longer Christianity, but the diffused occult Spirituality.