

Diffused New Religiosity: The universe as a higher power in the society and Popular Culture

By Dimitrios Soukis*

*And if I'm alone in bed, I will go to the window,
look up at the sky, and feel certain that loneliness is a lie,
because the Universe is there to keep me company.
[Paulo Coelho, Manuscript found in Akra]*

Introduction

The Definition Question

Before we address the issue that will be dealt with in this article, it is very important to refer to the definition of “Diffused New Religiosity” and its relation to the definitions of two other, similar, theories. These two theories are “Diffused Religion”¹ and “Invisible Religion”².

By the term “Diffused New Religiosity” (DNR) we refer to a large part of contemporary popular religion –mostly global, including elements from the organized religions– which has become detached and independent from them and are now part of people’s everyday life- as well as from other sources, such as the “pop culture’s” products (cinema, television, literature, etc.), the fields of psychology and self-improvement/self-actualization. Human beings do not consciously perceive these elements

* Dimitrios Soukis is postgraduate student of the History of Religions at the Dpt. of Social Theology of the School of Theology of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens and a teacher of theology.

1. R. Cipriani, *Diffused Religion, Beyond Secularization*, Palgrave Macmillan, Rome 2017.

2. Th. Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion, The Problem of Religion in Modern Society*, Routledge, The Macmillan Company, New York 1967.

as religious ones; they either retain some of their characteristics (e.g., the word Zen³ is used to describe processes or places that cause tranquility or aim at it) or, unconsciously, absolutize them (treats them as higher powers/beings) and appeal to them in times of need (e.g., the Stars, the Universe, even book heroes or popular artists).

On the other hand, the term “Diffused Religion” is used by Roberto Cipriani to describe the gradual diffusion of traditional religions’ elements and rituals in modern societies, their deprivation of spirituality –even, in certain cases, their alteration by other religions- and finally their transformation into social processes and habits. To understand the above proposition, we can rely on the example used by Cipriani himself⁴, adapted to the Greek reality. In Greece, the “Diffused Religion” is the Orthodox Christianity. Most Greeks, whether they profess to be Christians or not, visit churches on major holidays (Christmas, Easter, etc.) and celebrate with their families and friends, baptize their children, and marry in a religious wedding; they don’t practice this anymore because they are faithful Christians but as keeping a custom or as a social obligation. In other words, “Diffused Religion” describes the process of secularizing religions in societies.

The term “Invisible Religion”, introduced by Thomas Luckmann in 1963 in his book bearing the same title, has a different meaning. In it, Luckmann tries to prove that religion is human nature’s integral part, it remains important today, and cannot be defined only as participation in rituals⁵. Transcendence is achieved through the individual’s functional relationship with themselves and society⁶. He calls this kind of religiosity “Invisible Religion”; he calls it invisible because, unlike the organized religion, it does not have a tangible form; it is part of human nature and is present whether we notice it or not.

3. Zen is a Buddhist school developed in China during the 6th century AD, and from there it spread to Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. See J. R. McRae, “Chan”, in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Thomson Gale, 2005, pp. 1520.

4. R. Cipriani, *ibid.*, pp. 26-30.

5. G. Marshall, “invisible religion”, *A Dictionary of Sociology*, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/invisible-religion>.

6. Th. Luckmann, *ibid.*, p. 29.

2. Pop Culture and its relation with Religion

a) *Pop Culture: Definition*

To summarize the relationship between Pop Culture, on the one hand, and society and religion, on the other, we must briefly mention what exactly Pop Culture is. The term *Pop Culture* is of English origin and includes the words *Popular* and *Culture*. The word culture refers to all the products and thoughts produced by man, which surround him in his everyday life and constitute the framework within which he lives. We can divide culture into three different categories: high, popular, and pop)⁷. The latter, the object of our present paper, denotes the culture addressing most of society, specifically the commercial products that we usually associate with leisure, media, and art. Pop Culture objects may include products of literature, music, film, theatre, sports, video games, etc.⁸.

b) *Pop Culture's Relation with Religion*

Religion and Pop Culture are related in several ways and it is worth mentioning briefly all of them.

First relationship: the existence of religion within Pop Culture's products. In this relationship, Pop Culture "borrows" symbols, faces, or motifs from religion. To make this understandable, we can cite an example: In the popular Superman series (comics, cartoons, and cinema), the aliens with supernatural powers, from whom Superman descends, have names ending in -el (Superman is called Kal-el). These names remind us of the biblical angelic names, such as Gabriel and Michael (Gabri-el and Micha-el), which contain the Hebrew word "el" meaning "god"⁹. Here, then, we see that the series' creators borrow the ending of the angelic names to name the alien superhero who has come to save humanity.

7. Br. D. Forbes & J. H. Mahan (eds.), *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, University of California Press, London 2005, p. 4.

8. G. Lynch (ed.), *Between Sacred and Profane, Researching Religion and Popular Culture*, I. B. Tauris, London 2007, p. 8.

9. Er. Greenberg, "Did Superman Have Biblical Roots?", *Jewish Week*, 9 February 1996, pp. 41. 56. See also D. Peterson, "Superman has Jewish roots, rabbi agrees", *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 14 September 1996, BIO.

Second relation: the existence of elements of Pop Culture within religions. In the first relation, we saw that Pop Culture borrows elements from the religions; here, we observe the opposite. Religions, usually to become more “attractive” –especially to young people– borrow the means and ways offered by Pop Culture, which is constantly appealing to most of them.

Third relationship: Pop Culture functions as a religion. In this relationship we do not observe the exchange of elements between the two parties (Pop Culture - Religion), but the replacement of the latter by a product of the former. The place of religion (the place of the absolute here) can be taken by a Pop Culture product –such as a film (*Star Wars*) or a singer or a band (*The Beatles*)– or an element, such as a hero (*Neo, Matrix*) or an idea (the universe as God).

Fourth relation: Pop Culture and religion in dialogue. In this relationship, we mainly observe distrust and the attempt of one side to change the other. This is either because they do not agree with pop culture’s portrayal of religion (the portrayal of religions in pop culture as violent organizations) or because religion believes that pop culture promotes ideas and beliefs that are bad for the world¹⁰.

3. The research

a) *The purpose of the research*

The purpose of our research is to find out:

- (i) whether the idea of the universe as a higher power is pervasive in society;
- (ii) if it is pervasive, to what extent is it, and
- (iii) whether the idea of the universe as a higher power can be found in Pop Culture products.

b) *The questionnaire*

In order to achieve the objectives mentioned above, we prepared a questionnaire that was distributed –either electronically or printed– to 80 high school students (aged 13-14 years).

10. B. D. Forbes & J. H. Mahan (eds.), *ibid.*, pp. 10-16.

The questions they were asked to answer were as follows:

1. What are your religious beliefs?
2. Have you ever conceived of yourself as thinking of the universe as a higher power?
3. In times of need, have you ever turned to the universe to assist or give you a solution?
4. Have you ever noticed anyone turning to the universe as a higher power or asking for help?
5. Have you ever noticed in a movie, TV series, song, book, or video game that the universe is a higher power or that you turn to it for help or a solution to a problem?

c) The results

1. THE UNIVERSE AS A HIGHER POWER IN SOCIETY
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The Universe as a higher power	Appeal to the Universe in time of need	The Universe as a higher power or appeal to the Universe in time of need	The Universe as a higher power or appeal to the Universe by a familiar person	The Universe as a higher power or appeal to the Universe or appeal to a familiar person
49% (39)	41% (33)	66% (53)	64% (51)	79% (63)

2. THE UNIVERSE AS A HIGHER POWER IN POP CULTURE
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The Universe as a higher power in Pop Culture	The Universe as a higher power in Pop Culture in specific products of it	The Universe as a higher power or appeal to the Universe in time of need and the Universe as a higher power in Pop Culture
58% (46)	21% (26)	36% (29)

3. RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

Christian Orthodox	Atheist	No Answer
78% (62)	21% (17)	1% (1)

d) The Conclusions

Following the objectives we had set, the first thing to be examined based on the D.N.R.'s criteria (independence, extent, self-evident), as recorded by Prof. Papalexandropoulos in the first article of the present issue, and taking into account the results of the research, is whether the idea of the universe as a higher power is part of the D.N.R. and to what extent.

The first criterion of the D.N.R. we will deal with is that of extent. In Table 1 we notice that of the 80 people who filled out the questionnaires 53 of them (66%) answered that at least once in their lives they have either contemplated the universe as a higher power or asked for its help in times of need and almost 80% of the participants answered that, apart from contemplating the universe as a higher power or asking for help, they have at least once so far observed someone else doing so. Therefore, we can conclude that this particular idea is widespread in our society; this allows us to argue that it meets the first criterion.

The second criterion we will deal with is that of independence. Before analyzing the results of the research, it is necessary to mention the agent on which the idea of the universe as a higher power could depend, and this is none other than religion. The universe's worship as God or as a higher power is called pantheism¹¹ and has existed since antiquity. Our research has nevertheless shown that none of those who have said that they have thought of the universe as a higher power or have sought its help in times of need are pantheists. On the contrary, the majority of participants said they were orthodox Christians (78%) and fewer said they were atheists (21%). Accordingly, the idea of the universe as a higher power seems to be independent of any agent, so the second criterion is fulfilled.

The third and final criterion that remains for us to consider is that of the self-evident. To find the answer to this, we asked the third question in the questionnaire: "In times of need, have you ever turned to the Universe for help or a solution?". People -especially in Greece, where the majority are Orthodox Christians- in times of need usually unconsciously ask God, the Virgin Mary, or the saints for help. However, according to the results

11. See M. P. Levine, *Pantheism, A non-theistic concept of deity*, Routledge, London 1994.

of the questionnaire, a significant percentage (41%) of respondents said that in times of need, they turned to the universe for help. In addition, 64% of them answered that at least once they had observed a person they knew asking the universe for help. We believe that these numbers allow us to say that the idea of the universe as a higher power may meet the criterion of the self-evident.

Our research has not shown with absolute certainty that the idea of the universe as a higher power is an element of the D.N.R. More future extensive and detailed research will certainly need to follow, and we believe that by further studying Diffused New Religiosity, we will find more appropriate and detailed instruments, which will allow us to reach more certain conclusions.

With those that we have written above we have answered to at least some extent the two primary questions we have posed regarding our aims; it remains to see if the idea of the universe as a higher power can be traced in the Pop Culture products. We are going to find this out by using two tools: the first, of course, is the questionnaire. According to the answers we received, more than half of the participants (58%) said that they have noticed at least once in their lives the presence of the idea of the universe as a higher power in a Pop Culture product. In addition, 44% of them said that they remembered exactly where they had noticed it. The second tool is our research. After two months of delving into literary books, movies, TV series, and animated series/films, we identified several Pop Culture works that contain the idea under question. We briefly mention here some of them:

LITERATURE	MOVIES	TV SERIES	ANIMATION
<i>The Alchemist</i>	<i>Star Wars</i> ⁱ	<i>Friends</i>	<i>That time I got reincarnated as a slime</i>

ⁱ George Lucas, *Star Wars*, Lucasfilm Ltd., 1977-now.

<i>His Dark Materials</i> ⁱⁱ	<i>The Fountain</i> ⁱⁱⁱ	<i>Τὸ σὸί σου</i> ^{iv} <i>Your Kin</i>	<i>Dragon Ball Z</i> ^v
<i>The Riddle Master</i> ^{vi}	<i>Avatar</i> ^{vii}		<i>Princess Mononoke</i> ^{viii}
	<i>The Avengers</i> ^{ix}		<i>Pocahontas</i> ^x
	<i>The tree of life</i> ^{xi}		

ii. Philip Pullman, *His Dark Materials: Northern Lights, The Subtle Knife, The Amber Spyglass*, Scholastic, 2009.

iii. Darren Aronofsky, *The Fountain*, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2006.

iv. *Τὸ σὸί σου*, (*Your Kin*), AlphaTV, 2014-2019.

v. Akira Toriyama, *Dragon Ball Z*, Toei Animation, 1989-1996.

vi. Patricia McKillip, *The Riddle-Master* trilogy, Ace, 1999.

vii. James Cameron, *Avatar*, 20th Century Fox, 2009.

viii. Hayao Miyazaki, *Princess Mononoke*, Toho, 1997.

ix. Joss Whedon, Anthony Russo & Joe Russo, *The Avengers*, Walt Disney Studios, 2012-2019.

x. Mike Gabriel & Eric Goldberg, *Pocahontas*, Walt Disney Pictures, 1995.

xi. Terrence Malick, *The tree of life*, Summit Entertainment, 2011.

4. The Universe as a higher power in Pop Culture

a) *The Alchemist*¹²: *Where it all began*

The *Alchemist* is without a doubt the work of Pop Culture that established the idea that the universe functions as a higher power. We reached to this conclusion for the following two reasons: First, the sales of the book. The *Alchemist* is the third best-selling book in world literature, having sold more than 150,000,000 copies worldwide since its release¹³ and has been translated into 56 languages – more than any other literary work except the Bible¹⁴. The book's wide dissemination has made it possible to transmit its messages and ideas around the world. Second, the repetition of the idea within the book. The author quotes the phrase:

12. Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist*, HarperCollins, 1993.

13. <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/532/nine-books-sold-more-100-million-copies-and-how-they-compare-my-book>.

14. From the writer's social media <https://www.facebook.com/paulocoelho/photos/a.241365541210/10158601249696211/?type=3>.

“When you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it.” at least six times in the book¹⁵ while in many other cases, the phrase is implied.

Before proceeding to the description of the universe’s particular characteristics in *The Alchemist*, we should briefly mention the book’s basic plot. The young Spanish shepherd Santiago, after a dream he had, sets out on a journey in search of his destiny. Along the way, he meets many people who, either consciously or by chance, will guide him on his journey. The phrase: “When you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it” is said to him at different times by a wandering king and an alchemist, and he repeats it several times throughout the book.

Let’s start with the first characteristic of the universe: it is the creator of all things. Typical is the sentence towards the end of the book: “Because a grain of sand is a moment of creation, and the universe has taken millions of years to create it”¹⁶. Again, the universe didn’t just create things or people. It also gave them a meaning of existence, which in the book is called “*Personal legend*”¹⁷. Every man and every object are born with an “ultimate desire”¹⁸, which is the mission of each one while he is alive. The universe “conspires” for man to fulfill this desire.

The second characteristic of the universe is *language*. In *The Alchemist* man can speak with the universe, provided he learns the “Language of the World”¹⁹. To learn the latter, a person needs two things: courage²⁰ and true love²¹. Courage is necessary for those who seek their “personal legend”, for only when they seek it the universe will offer them its help²²; love is necessary, for only true love does not imprison humans, but leaves them free to fulfill their “ultimate desire”²³.

15. Paulo Coelho, *ibid.*, pp. 30, 41, 45, 62, 85, 104.

16. Paulo Coelho, *ibid.*, p. 114.

17. Paulo Coelho, *ibid.*, p. 29.

18. Paulo Coelho, *ibid.*, p. 30.

19. Paulo Coelho, *ibid.*, p. 74.

20. Paulo Coelho, *ibid.*, p. 101.

21. Paulo Coelho, *ibid.*, p. 86.

22. Paulo Coelho, *ibid.*, p. 101.

23. Paulo Coelho, *ibid.*, p. 108.

Finally, it is important to mention that the universe is made up of everything in the world, even man himself. And since in *The Alchemist* the universe is God, then man is also part of God. This can be understood from the book's following sentence: "The boy reached through to the Soul of the World, and saw that it was a part of the Soul of God. And he saw that the Soul of God was his own soul. And that he, a boy, could perform miracles"²⁴.

b) *Friends*²⁵: *Where the Universe remains silent*

In the popular comedy series *Friends*, we follow the lives of six young people (three men and three women) who are trying to cope with the demands of life, succeed professionally, and find love.

Of the six young people, we'll focus here on the group's "weirdo", Phoebe Buffay. Phoebe frequently mentions elements from various religions and traditions and takes seriously the influence they exert on her life, without actually being a believer in any of those religions. Some of these are karma, fate, foretelling the future, and the universe.

In one of the first episodes, the bank makes a mistake and credits Phoebe's account with a sum of money. Since Phoebe thinks karma is very important, she decides to donate that money, but they return a certain amount of it to her. With it, she buys a soft drink, in which she finds a human finger, and as a result, she receives a respectable amount of money as compensation. At the end of the episode, Phoebe comes to believe that her karma is "evil" and cries out, looking up to the sky: "What is up with the universe?"²⁶. With this phrase, she shows her displeasure with the universe, which she holds responsible for what has happened to her during the day.

In another episode, aired during the eighth season of the TV series, Phoebe "reads the cup", trying to predict the future of herself and her friends. In her cup, she read that she would meet a man on the same day, which she did. But the man she met turned out to be bad. When

24. Paulo Coelho, *ibid.*, p. 135.

25. D. Crane & M. Kauffman, *Friends*, NBC, 1994-2004.

26. D. Crane & M. Kauffman, "The One with the Thumb", *Friends*, season 1, episode 3, NBC, 1996.

Phoebe realized this, she asked, “The universe said I was gonna meet a nice guy, and that’s what they gave me?”²⁷. Once again she turns to the universe to express her grievances, although it did not answer her on either occasion.

The universe as a higher power in *Friends* is impersonal and inaccessible and we infer its presence only through Phoebe, who believes that it is responsible for many events in her life, and when something goes wrong, she does not hesitate to blame it. In addition, she tries to communicate with the universe either by talking to it directly -without waiting for an answer- or by “reading the cup”.

c) *That time I got reincarnated as a slime*²⁸:

Where beings converse with the Universe

In the successful anime series anime *That time I got reincarnated as a slime* the protagonist Satoru Mikami dies during a robbery and is reincarnated into another world in the form of a slime²⁹. In this world, the universe, called “Voice of the World”, is the supreme, absolute, power. When Satoru dies, he hears the “Voice of the World” in his head, which, while transporting him to the other world, reincarnates him and invests him with special properties (e.g. resistance to cold and heat) and powers³⁰. In the other world, the “Voice of the World” is always close to Satoru, now called Rymuru, and helps him to survive and develop his powers.

In the world of *That time I got reincarnated as a slime* the universe is not inaccessible. It is usually close to people and can chat with them. Also, the universe does not work automatically. It has a consciousness and a personality. It chooses whom and how to help and can get angry or laugh depending on how it is spoken to or treated³¹.

27. D. Crane & M. Kauffman, “The One with the Tea Leaves”, *Friends*, season 1 episode 3, NBC, 2002.

28. Yasuhito Kikuchi, *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*, 8-bit, 2018.

29. *Slime Slime*: They are creatures that we meet in video games and series animated cartoons, which are shaped like slime, are round and can change their shape at will.

30. Yasuhito Kikuchi, “The Storm Dragon, Veldora”, *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*, season 1, episode 1, 8-bit, 2018.

31. Yasuhito Kikuchi, “The One Unleashed”, *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*, season 2, episode 12, 8-bit, 2021.