

# The Diffused New Religiosity

By Stylianos Papalexandropoulos\*

The idea of an approach to Diffused New Religiosity (D.N.R.) that would be as comprehensive as possible arose from the observation that such an approach does not exist in the international literature<sup>1</sup>. This is difficult to explain, considering the extent it has occupied in the modern soul and the influence it exerts. Perhaps attention has not been paid to the fact that, at a time when once all-powerful organized New Religions (N.R.) have died or lost their former power, of the two forms in which the New Religiosity exists, organized and diffused, the one that remains and deeply affects human civilization is D.N.R. Or, perhaps, it has not yet been noticed that all the elements which can be characterized as diffused constitute a whole that can be called by this name. Finally, it may be confused with New Age. However, the New Age, where it is examined, is clearly conceived as a total of many groups organized in one way or another. In the case of D.N.R. it is exactly the opposite: the elements that constitute it “float”, so to speak, independent of any kind of organization, in the thought and perceptions of people of all kinds, everyday people, intellectuals, anyone and they find their expression in all areas of culture and life, often unrelated to the phenomenon of religion. They may even find residence there, so we can see these areas as a kind of hosts. These hosts, as long as they exist, differ from organized groups in that their relationship to the elements of D.N.R. they host is not possessive. Such hosts may be literature, cinema,

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1. The concept of diffused religion certainly exists. However, we have not come across any publications related to the diffused new religiosity. Moreover, the concept of diffused religion has in the relevant publications a different meaning (mainly that of expansion) from the one we give here to D.N.R.

video games, song, everyday speech, ideas about nutrition, about fitness or health, perceptions of how the world works, of the composition of man, of the meaning of life, etc. Of course, there can be a mixed situation, i.e. an element of D.N.R. existing as the property of an organization, group, or even an individual, but also completely free. Yoga is an example that helps to understand this. The various types of yoga exist, of course, as a product owned (and distributed) by organizations, groups, or individuals' but it also exists in lifestyle magazines, on the internet, in art, nutrition etc. as ideas and practices that do not belong anywhere.

Thus D.N.R. can be distinguished as a particular entity, or a particular phenomenon. One might say that because of its free nature D.N.R. resembles popular religion – or it has already become popular religion, or, to be more exact, it is a big modern part of popular religion. If we look at it this way, youth is that which discerns this part from popular religion. Just like N.R. in general, the elements which constitute it and which have different meanings, mainly that in their current form they have appeared recently, are new.

In order to select the elements that constitute D.N.R. some criteria need to be defined. We regard the following as such:

### 1. Independence

We have already touched on this criterion. The autonomy from any sort of possessive carrier gives to the elements of D.N.R. their main quality. This autonomy can exist from the start (just as e.g. the idea of the universe as God, which appeared from the start within carriers such as literature) or it can be secondary (just as e.g. in the case of the idea of karma, which initially belonged to N.R. of eastern origin). The elements per se are the same as those one comes across in the huge kaleidoscope occupied by religion within human civilization. The same or similar elements can also be found in religion old or new, great or small. Dissimilarity is the characteristic of independent existence.

### 2. Extent

The elements that compose D.N.R. know no borders precisely because of their diffused character. They are spread by their hosts in order to

take possession of the huge extent they occupy within human civilization. We can say that this extent is global. In other words, they as a whole constitute a global, universal and common religion, in the sense that they are being propagated everywhere.

### 3. Self-evident

The elements that constitute D.N.R. are established and are perceived to be given, self-evident truths. For example, meditation (in a religious sense, as a means of communication with what one considers to be divine, as a means of self-transformation, of self-knowledge etc.) has come to be widely regarded as such self-evident means having substituted prayer in this role. One indication of this fact is how much prayer's mention is being avoided while meditation's, on the contrary, is always made with ease.

### 4. The religious character

Many of these elements, however, have either lost this character (when yoga, for example, becomes a mere bodily exercise, or when Zen ends up meaning merely tranquility or plainness) or waver at the boundary between religious and not. The matter requires further deliberation, however we think that a trace of their religious origin is always present.

Based on these criteria we can define the following as elements that compose D.N.R.:

## Elements of eastern origin

### 1. Reincarnation

The idea of reincarnation is more widely diffused than anything else. It often appears as part of the total of elements that constitute a faith. This faith, however, consists of traditional elements e.g. as part of Christian faith, not neo-religious ones.

## 2. Karma

It traditionally accompanies the idea of reincarnation as its creative cause. It is present in D.N.R. usually as an element irrelevant to it that takes on another meaning, like that of fate.

## 3. Yoga

It is perhaps the most widely diffused idea and practice because it serves the purposes of various religious systems, but, by detaching several of its own elements (e.g. positions of the body, breathing techniques etc.) and therapeutic trainings, or improvements of mental state or physical condition.

## 4. Meditation

This central element of yoga is likewise widely spread traditionally in a variety of forms (like mindfulness for instance). Its religious aspect is often more obvious and emphasized than in the case of yoga

## 5. The anthropology of chakras

Various anthropologies (that is, ideas about the composition and function of man) are considered by many to be self-evidently true. The one concerning the energy centers called chakras is in various forms the anthropological basis of various yoga. It is also one of the most widespread.

## 6. God is within us

One of the most diffused ideas is that the absolute in various forms (e.g. as God, as enlightenment etc.) is within us and not somewhere out there. We don't have to look far for it. This idea forms the basis of many yogic and other practices. That our soul is a winged being, an angel, or that someone is "an angel on earth"<sup>2</sup> can be seen as a version of the same idea.

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2. See <https://www.beliefnet.com/inspiration/angels/galleries/7-signs-you-may-be-an-angel-on-earth.aspx>.

## Elements of a different origin

### 1. The universe as God

The universe has taken God's place in many people's minds. It is understood as an object. However, at the same time it is understood as something personal, namely, endowed with intellect, will, sympathy etc. An example of this is the well-known phrase that if one desires something very much, the universe conspires to realize it. Why is the universe preferred in God's place and instead of God? Its existence is taken for granted by experience, unlike God that no one knows if He exists or not. It is an object. Therefore there is no danger of taking away one's freedom, which is at risk of being abrogated in the case of a personal God.

### 2. Energy

The idea of energy is here defined as an element which can help one move away from a state that is considered relative or bad. It becomes absolute as a divine element, often in a vague sense, as something that certain places possess, which for this reason become something like sites of pilgrimage.

### 3. Supernatural beings

This category includes a multitude of beings. By the term "supernatural" we mean beings who possess such characteristics that make them beings of another, higher level. They may be –and that is the case usually– part of this world, like the heroes of video games or neomythology. They may belong to other dimensions or worlds that are nevertheless part of the entire visible and invisible universe. Such beings are, for example, aliens or angels. They exist in various categories such as saviours (of the city, of the world), like Batman or Superman, or personal protectors, like angels, "Spirit Guides" etc. Robots show signs that they are about to assume such a role. A kind of robot mysticism is already being developed. The other beings are gods, as long as everything they possess goes beyond the ordinary: superior knowledge, supernatural powers etc. Or they are simply other life forms, where distinctness is conceived

as a deity. The preference of such beings over God is the same as that found in polytheism. Although supernatural, these beings are not transcendental or completely different. So they are seen as something close to me, as something related to me and to some extent familiar. They are seen as beings with whom I can communicate and as beings to whom I can make requests.

#### 4. Saviours

This is a special category of supernatural beings that exist within this world. They save the world, the earth (like Superman etc.) or the city (like Batman) from villains or from supernatural, alien and other threats.

#### 5. Regions of the world

These are areas different from the everyday, known world. They are invested with a religious character mainly because of their distinctness from the world. These are other dimensions, the outer space, the multiple universe (consisting of many worlds), or even artificial worlds (as in the *Matrix*). These are new cosmologies with a mythical and at the same time scientific basis. They exist mainly in science fiction and neomythology.

#### 6. The sanctity of nature

The deification of nature itself is one of the oldest religious ideas that have been diffused from systems such as ecofeminism, etc. Related to this is the idea of the universe as absolute.

#### 7. The physical wellness or well being

At its heart lies the idea that nature as it stands is something divine. Therefore, everything that is physically given partakes of this divine character. For this reason it can be considered part, or version, of no. 6. However, it exists as an independent set of ideas and practices. This includes alternative medicine based on treatments considered “natural”

(non-artificial), or “positive psychology”<sup>3</sup>. This also includes alternative anthropologies that can be used to improve physical fitness (e.g. aura), the apotheosis of healthy food and healthy living, etc.

#### 8. Self-transformation

It means transformation into something else, usually seen as superior to the common man. Various ideas and practices belong here, such as neo-shamanism, mainly a result of the huge spread of Castaneda’s work, magic etc. Also, practices such as martial arts may have such a purpose.

#### 9. Self-help

Self-help comes largely from New Religions, such as New Thought, and focuses entirely on powers, qualities etc., often occult (e.g. the healing power of the mind, the power of positive thinking). Because of this, it elevates the subject to a being who has the state of himself and his life under his control to an absolute degree, i.e. to a little God. It often hides the purpose of self-transformation into something higher.

#### 10. Antichristian myths

This is a particular category. Anti-Christianity is a structural feature of New Religions and has been widely diffused. This includes unhistorical narratives (myths), such as that Christianity de-sanctified nature, that it destroyed ancient civilization, that it was the perpetual enemy of Hellenism etc.

#### 11. Conspiracy theory

The truth or falsehood of what the various conspiracy theories claim is not the issue here. Conspiracy theory is seen as religion, in so far as it presents the religious characteristic of projecting a truth, which is distinguished by absolutism, but also the consequent behaviours of its consideration as the basic meaning of its subject’s life, a fanatical

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3. Where “spirituality”, i.e. meditation, but also “forgiveness” etc. are put at the service of “wellness” see <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-pursuit-of-peace/202302/5-spiritual-practices-that-increase-well-being>.

obsession, or has elements similar to those that characterize religions<sup>4</sup> etc.

## 12. Death Culture

It is the worship of elements associated with the phenomenon of death (dark afterlife worlds, the creatures living in them, skulls, etc.). They are often associated with the worship of Satan. The horrible assumes a sacred character and becomes fascinating.

## 13. The distinction between spirituality and religion

Spirituality has many meanings. For example, by this can be meant a religiosity that aims to unite with what it considers to be absolute. This is based on an anthropology according to which the divine exists within us. In this sense it coincides with the form of religion called mysticism. Spirituality can also mean religiosity that is free from all dependence and always open to changes, new elements, etc. It is the religiosity that its subject constructs by selecting what it considers to be truths and combining them into a whole. A common element of all concepts of spirituality is that it is distinguished from religion, which is seen as characterized by the absence of freedom, by dependence, dogmatism, etc. Consequently, spirituality is considered to represent something positive, while religion represents something negative. Also, based on its positivity, it is generally presented as a substitute for religion.

## 14. Non-belonging

It usually occurs as a result of not accepting any authority (in this case, religious) and elevating the subject to such authority at the same time<sup>5</sup>.

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4. "Ideas shared by both religion and conspiracy theories – including the paranormal, esotericism, millennialism, and prophecy". See David G. Robertson, Asbjørn Dyrendal, "Conspiracy Theories and Religion", <https://academic.oup.com/book/25369/chapterabstract/192469285?redirectedFrom=fulltext&login=false>.

5. "As far as their carriers are concerned, they themselves are the source of elements that constitute their religion and the denial or rejection of any kind of external or higher authority, or article of faith". St. Papalexandropoulos, «Πολυπολιτισμικότητα και πολυθρησκευτικότητα», in: *Φιλία και Κοινωνία: Τιμητικός Τόμος στον Καθηγητή Γρηγόριο Δ. Ζιάκα*, Vania Publications, Thessaloniki 2008, p. 437. See also the sections



## The general qualities of the New Religions

There are general qualities in the New Religions. In other words, there are qualities that are common to them. These qualities often formed the basis for the creation, as well as the success of the New Religions. Moreover, while they are diffused, they also characterize D.N.R. in general. Such qualities may be the following:

### A. Reasonableness – Objectivity

Based on these two, the elements of D.N.R. are quite often characterized as “scientific”. They are true as objectively true (i.e. they are provable or known empirically in various ways). As such they differentiated from elements of “faith”. The latter are dogmatically imposed, while the former are available for objective verification. Here belong elements that have become diffuse coming from religions of knowledge, such as Theosophy, Jungian psychology, etc.

### B. Irrationalism

In modern times Romanticism nurtured irrationalism by reacting to the man of the Enlightenment who was limited to rationalism. Irrationalism favoured religions such as Zen. The perception of freedom as an absolute (a characteristic of the 50s and 60s, represented by beatniks and hippies, which is now making a comeback) is one of the most pervasive expressions of irrationalism. This also includes the exaltation to an absolute degree of the idea of the priority of living or personal experience.

### C. Effectiveness

Tangible, empirical results are sought, or expected, in religious activity.

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“Self as autonomy” and “Self-Autonomy as Spiritual Ideology” in: Jon. P. Bloch, *New Spirituality, Self and Belonging*, Praeger, London 1998, p. 33 et seq.

#### D. Inner Worldliness (Ἐνδοκοσμιότης)

We have called this quality “cosmotheism” elsewhere<sup>6</sup>. It is the tendency to deify not transcendental magnitudes, but magnitudes that are elements of the world. The universe, all the superheroes, the deities in video games and elsewhere, a planet that performs miracles in Stanislaw Lem’s *Solaris*, the Dust in Philip Pullman’s works, the stars, etc., are elements that are parts of the world.

#### Abstract ideas: A particular category

##### A. Otherness

In this case, signs, parts, powers, potentialities of the universe characterized by otherness (e.g. other forms of life, other potentialities, higher ones, etc.) are emphasized and deified or made sacred.

##### B. Wholeness (the infinite, the one, the whole)

This concept, through which the absolute is conceived in many New Religions, has been diffused. It is a very common conception of the absolute in D.N.R. as well. This concept takes the place of the absolute not in a transcendental but, as a rule, in a cosmotheistic sense, as in the cases of the unity of everything, unity as the basis of many, the unity among people<sup>7</sup>, etc.

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6. See «Οἱ νέες θρησκείες: Ἱστορική ἐπισκόπηση καὶ συστηματικὴ θεώρηση» in: St. Papalexandropoulos, *Δοκίμια Ἱστορίας τῶν Θρησκειῶν*, Hellenika Grammata Publications, Athens 1997, p. 157 et seq.

7. “Deep down, nothing separates us, we are one and we live in harmony with each other in an environment of mutual respect and empathy. I choose to name and accept this utopia as my own god”. Interview given by Giannis Kalogiros to Alexandra Skaraki, *Kathimerini*, 9-10-2022, p. 10.