

The Different Forms of Religion

By Timo Schmitz, *Philosopher*

During human history, the systems of beliefs shaped different forms. They developed and evolved, they were formalised or reformed, and thus until today, several stages can be found when it comes to religions all around the world. The difficult thing however is that the term religion might have two functions. First, religion might be the headline for every form of theological belief, and second, it might be the term for the most developed form. In this article, I want to emphasize that though some forms are more developed than others, they are not meant to be degraded and in fact should be seen equal in their worth.

As I pointed out in my German-language book on Daoism, there are six kinds of belief, and one anti-belief¹. These six forms are: religion, paganism, shamanism, animism, totemism, and magic. The anti-belief is called superstition.

Religion might be defined as written tradition. Thus, it is a very formalised, sometimes even dogmatised, form of belief, as there are one or more holy books that determine the views of the believer. Though lay following might appear, most of these religions have organised institutions that build societies. The rites for devotion are also transmitted through these holy books. Religions for instance are Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Yazdanism, Chondoism, Daoism, and Confucianism.

The second form is paganism. The pagan beliefs work the same as religions, but they were mostly orally transmitted and have no holy book or no broadly accepted written transmission which is regarded to be sacred, though texts of description and books might exist. An example for paganism might be the Rodnover, the faith of the Slavs. Concerning written knowledge, many “Valuable references to East Slavic paganism come from the witness of foreigners who had visited the Slavic lands in The Ancient and The Medieval Ages. A lot of information about East Slavic paganism is given by the important Slavic written sources: *The Primary Chronicle*, *The Tale of Igor’s Campaign*, *The Lectures against paganism*. However, historical records have shown that there are not enough first-hand written ancient records of Slavic paganism, so it is also studied by the analysis of medieval and later records of oral folklore”.² As it has to be pointed out “The Slavs inherited from the Indo-Europeans a threefold functional division of society (called *tripartition*) into *priest-rulers*, *warriors*, and *peasant-producers*. The Slavic peoples held the Indo-European concept of a universe divided into the three realms of *heaven*, *earth*, and an *underworld*. This tripartite division of the worldly universe was sometimes called by the deity name *Triglav*, which means ‘three-head’. In what

we can piece together of the ancient Slavic pantheon, each realm had its own set of divinities, and each class seems to have worshipped its own favorite gods".³ As one can clearly see, like religions, the Rodnover had three realms. As most traditions that are known today go back to the Middle Ages or earlier, one has to understand the picture of religion in the past. Christianity for instance had three realms as well, such as heaven, hell and purgatory. While in Abrahamic traditions, the heaven-hell dualism can be found, in Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism due to the belief into reincarnation, several realms are known where each has its benefits depending on the rank. Thus, the Buddhist heaven is not the highest goal, but still the best realm in the space of desires, while the hell realm with its different warm and cold hells is the worst stage that exists. In Daoism, Confucianism and Chondoism, harmony is more important and the interaction between the divine and the human plays the most important role. In Daoism, one shall become one with the Dao, in Confucianism one shall please the heavenly will and follow societal harmony, and in Chondoism one shall respect the highest principle (which is like the Dao from Daoism or the Good from Platonism), which however at the same time is heaven.

Rodnover work in the same way than the Western religious tradition, in which worship and veneration determines fate. However, the Rodnover focus on interaction with nature and naturalistic themes, thus ecology stands in the foreground, which is also a common theme in other religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Daoism.

Another example for paganism is Circassian Paganism known as Xabze (which literally means 'morality'). Adige Xabze is the moral code of the Circassians and the basic ground of Circassian society. For Circassians, "It is their code of honour and is based on mutual respect and above all requires responsibility, discipline and self-control. Adyghe Xabze functions as the Circassian unwritten law yet was highly regulated and adhered to in the past. The Code requires that all Circassians are taught courage, reliability and generosity. Greed, desire for possessions, wealth and ostentation are considered disgraceful ('Yemiku') by the Xabze code. In accordance with Xabze, hospitality was and is particularly pronounced among the Circassians. A guest is not only a guest of the host family, but equally a guest of the whole village and clan. Even enemies are regarded as guests if they enter the home and being hospitable to them as one would with any other guest is a sacred duty".⁴

However, in the past it also regulated the religious beliefs, and nowadays Circassian Neopaganism is undergoing a revival. Adige Xabze has strong similarities with Buddhism, as the word Xabze (Хабзэ) itself already reveals, at it means 'word of the cosmos' and thus comes close to dharma, which means law – especially as Xabze functioned as moral law for

centuries and still plays an important role. The cosmic idea might also have slight parallels to Daoism.

The grounds of Circassian paganism were orally transmitted and later written down in the Nart Saga, which influenced the whole Caucasus. Like other Caucasian Neopaganistic concepts – such as Estseg Din (or Iron Din) of the Ossetians – Adige Xabze is monotheistic. Their God is called Tha (Тхьэ). He “is the creator of the Laws of the Universe, which represent His expression. T’ha gave man an opportunity to understand the laws, bringing him closer to God. T’ha does not interfere in everyday life, presenting man with freedom of choice. T’ha does not take any shape, He is Omnipresent, *‘His spirit is scattered throughout space’.*”⁵

He is symbolised through a ‘T’ (Т-дамыгъэ)⁶, the cosmos is represented by a wheel (compare the wheel of life in Buddhism).

As religions are based on scripts and thus often organised and institutionalised in associations, and paganism is mainly transmitted orally and/ or was just later written down, it is not institutionalised in churches, but festivals rather take place on streets with the community, sacred places, etc. and sometimes it is even practised in only small communities such as the family (see Etseg Din, where there is a community medium to represent the will of God⁷), which comes close to lay following in traditional script religions (such as in Buddhism or Daoism). **Traditional scripts and traditional institutions are the denominator for religions, which formalises them and makes them static. Paganism has no traditional holy scriptures or traditional associations, and as a result paganism is fluid, vividly and easily reformable to nowadays society, making it a dynamic system of belief, since transmissions might differ from era to era.**

Unlike paganism which often has a folklore transmission, shamanism is more exclusive, the theological background is known to the whole society, but the worship is only known by the shaman who can instruct the community. Unlike paganism, where gods are often transcendent beings, shamanism regards the shaman to be a medium (like a priest), however, the spirit might probably live within the shaman and he or she is possessed by it. This is also the ground for Chondoism, a modern text religion which believe that God lives within the believer, which goes back to Korean Shamanism, where shamans – mostly women – are possessed by the spirits, who make them obsessed. This obsession, which is described as loss of self-control is called Sinbyöng (신병) in Korean language. As a result, one has to communicate with the spirit and receive him. A female shaman is known as ‘mu’ (무) or ‘mudang’ (무당), a male shaman is known as ‘Paksu’ (박수). Shamans coming into office through nomination are

called ‘sessŭmu’ (세습무), which often appears in South Korea, while shamans who are introduced through a ceremony are called ‘kangsinmu’ (강신무) (which happens rather in North Korea). The theological background is the trinity of the Heavenly Emperor – Hanŭllim (하늘님) – which in its conception comes close to the Heavenly Emperor in Confucianism, the Heavenly Principle in Chinese Shamanism from Zhou period and the Highest Way from Daoism. The three divine beings are Hwanin (환인), Hwanung (환웅) and Tangun (단군).

Thus, as one can see, there is a clear theological concept, and the shaman as a medium uses dances and rituals as a means of communication and expression of the spirit.

Tengrism is the Turko-Mongolian shamanism, once spread from Hungary to China, it still can be found in Tatarstan, Kyrgyzstan (as can be even seen through the national flag), Kazakhstan (here again it is represented in the national flag), Mongolia (symbolism can be found on the coat of arms), Mongolian-inhabited provinces in China (at about 80% of Inner Mongolia’s population are Tengrists, though less than 20% are Mongolians), Yakutia (here again in the flag), Chuvashia (also in the flag), Buryatia and other Turkic- or Mongolian-inhabited areas. Special interest for Tengrism can be found in Turkey, here again Tengrist symbolism can be found in the national flag.

The term shaman or the concept of shamanism in general is derived from the religious understanding of the Siberian and Mongolian tribes, and thus, most people associate shamanism with Mongolia.

In their belief, Tengri means Heaven, and again a special interaction of Heaven and Earth such as known from Confucianism can be adopted, however, unlike Confucianism where there is one highest principle, the Tengrist Heaven has a stronger god-like quality, and the main object is not the harmony of the society and the role of the people such as done in Confucianism, but the harmony with nature and all kind of creatures and being, such as can be found in the basis of Daoism. Even further, just as in Daoism, Tengrism sees the world as a self-in-motion, and thus human-beings have to treat it good.

“Perhaps better than almost any other people, Buryats and Mongols have understood the importance of keeping the world in balance and to revere the air, waters, and land. From the traditional Buryat point of view, the world is not a dead place, but vibrantly alive with spirits and souls in every thing and in every place, also that all animals and plants have sentient souls much like ourselves.”⁸

However, shamanism is often falsely associated with magic, which is not the case, but the image of magic shamanism is mainly propagated by imposters who try to make a hype or cult out of it in an esoteric lineage (see Schmitz’ criticism on Feng-Shui⁹).

The shaman works as an assistant to mediate between the immanent and transcendent world, in most shamanic traditions, the spirit lives within the shaman, thus he represents the spirit in the world. Another example for shamanism is the North American Shamanism.

The Abenaki or Crow for instance have healers who equal the role of the shaman. The Crow belief in a God who is called "The One who made Everything". Though he created everything, the universe consists of three worlds: the physical world, the spirit world, and the world where God resides. The spirits are empowered by God, as they have a divine power that God gave them. In Crow belief, spirits are the intermediate between God and the physical world as the spirit world is in between both worlds. However, a special role is given to the healer, called Akbaalia. North American belief also draws the border to totemism, as it is not only a shamanic tradition. Totemism is the belief in sacred objects, such as animals or mythical supernatural creatures. Totemism is the link between shamanism and animism. In shamanism, objects probably might be reference for veneration as well, such as mountains which are regarded to be holy for Koreans, since the spirits live in there. **However, totemism regards the object itself to be holy, the object and the spirit are unseparable.** Totemism can mainly be found among indigenous people in Oceania, as well as in Australia.

Animism on the contrary is a belief in spirits, however, there often is a lack of deep rooted theology. Instead, everything is transmitted through folklore or education. Thus, there often is a lack of an almighty God, as well as sacral buildings. While shamanism has a strong cosmology and mythology, animism focusses on genealogy, exorcism, and folklore.

A prominent example is Laotian animism, known as Satsana Phi, where Phi stand for the gods. Phi are gods that factually can be found everywhere. They protect buildings, people, temples and have many different functions. There are good spirits and bad spirits. The phi are connected to the five elements, which is very interesting since these five elements also exist in Daoism, which leads to the factual situation that Thai-Laotian animistic belief also includes shamanistic elements. Guardian spirits and ancestral spirits are very prominent. Most folk beliefs function in this way. They are often decentralised and thus differ from region to region though being practised together in local communities. They fulfill ethical functions, medical beliefs, guardian function, communicative functions (between this world and other worlds). **Thus, unlike shamanic rituals which are often taught from one shamanic generation to another and practised collectively, the animistic belief is decentralised and varies a lot from region to region and often serves as a social function in a local community. The belief is thus often restricted to the community, some ceremonies are more individual**

and play a role in families, other ceremonies are to keep together the collective and conducted collectively.

Laotian animism also contains superstitious elements on the one side, but religious elements on the other side. Laotians took the stance of reincarnation from the Indian tradition (Hinduism/ Buddhism) which became an important matter in local belief. J.G. Learned points out: "Many Lao believe that the khwan of persons who die by accident, violence, or in childbirth are not reincarnated, becoming instead phi phetu (malevolent spirits). Animist believers also fear wild spirits of the forest. Other spirits are associated with the household, caves, mountains, rivers, or groves of trees and are neither inherently benevolent nor evil. Regular or occasional offerings however ensure their favor and assistance in human affairs. Similar rituals to ensure the favor of the spirit of the rice are performed before the beginning of the planting season. This practice had mostly died out in the extended area around modernized Vientiane, the capital".¹⁰

As can be seen, animistic traditions are very fluid and vary strongly from era to era. While some traditions die out, new traditions are introduced. Thus, the belief is not conditioned to any holy book or folk tale, but can develop under any circumstance and syncretise with other influences.

The most primitive form of belief is magic. Even though magic might have its cosmology or theology, it is often regarded as a secretive, exclusive teaching, and thus, all what the magician has to do is making people believe in it. For this reason, magic was always used as a means of might as one scared people with the consequences of a teaching that they couldn't understand. **Unlike animism, the main core of magic is the belief to be able to influence someone with a mighty power or being influenced by a mighty power.** An extreme form of magic is superstition which is a negative belief. Magic is rather neutral, it can be astonishing for people or scare them, thus either be positive or negative. However, all forms of belief have one thing in common. The belief mainly works in mind, tries to explain the world, tries to find ethics and regulate the society, give a kind of certainty in uncertain times, tries to find peaceful solutions for problems, ask questions that matter to anyone. Superstition as negative belief is also just a pure mind phenomena, however, it tries to explain the world through fear, regulate the society by scaring everyone, making people uncertain even in certain times, doesn't really deal with the core of problems (at least not on a rational level), has a specific reply in every situation which makes the believer to lose control of rational decisions and prefers decision in favor for the superstitious belief.

With this system of categorization, all kinds of religious belief can be classified.

Notes:

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