

THE GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF THE WORLD RELIGIONS

Vasile Mara, István Dombay¹

Abstract: This study aimed to capture the distribution of the religious beliefs and practices around the globe, emphasizing their location and regionalization. In order to highlight the interactions between the natural and the religious practices of a social group, it is necessary to shape the geographical space according to the relational component. This is a result of the interference between the component support (the natural environment) and the active component (the religious community), making together a religious environment.

Keywords: *regionalization, religious community, religious environment.*

1. Introductory problems

This study aimed to capture the distribution of the religious beliefs and practices around the globe, but emphasizing their location and regionalization.

In order to highlight the interactions between the natural and the religious practices of a social group it is necessary to shape the geographical space according to the relational component. This is a result of the interference between the component support (the natural environment) and the active component (the religious community), making together a *religious environment*.

It is good to know that the concept of “religion”, which comes from the Latin word *religio* doesn't have an adequate correspondent in any of the languages (among the European languages) except for the Arabic language. It is assumed that, at the beginning, this concept meant a man power outer, which constrained him, with the threat of supplicants, so he had to have a special behavior or it was a kind of “taboo” concept. As the time passed, this kind of meaning became unclear and *religio* would designate the ritual life and the obligations to the gods.

Religious believes have determined, in a special way, the citizens' lifestyle in all the regions of the world, but also certain social or demographic characteristics. Although in developed countries the believes and religious practices decreased in intensity, the biggest part of the population being indifferent to the religious phenomenon, their last influence can be seen in the landscape of the towns and of villages, which are most of the times dominated by religious edifices, through traditions, customs or abstinence habits.

2. The regionalization principles of religions

The research of the distribution of the universal religions on the surface of the Earth followed five fundamental principles: the spatiality principle, the causal principle, the integration principle, the historicism principle and the regionalism principle.

¹ Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of Geography, Gheorgheni University Extension, 535500, Grădina Csiki, Gheorgheni, Harghita, Romania ext.gheorgheni@geografie.ubbcluj.ro

The spatiality principle is characteristic to the Geography specifying that the geographical fact occupies a specific space, customizing it. The position fixation is important because a certain phenomenon has influences upon the place where it is, upon the nearby regions. This study focussed on the religious phenomenon in its genesis, spatial development and distribution, outlining many areas and regions where the people of a special religion have the majority, that religion being more consistent.

The causal principle is a methodological principle with a general feature, which is applied in every science, searching and trying to answer the question “Why?” in the Geography field as well. All the actions in the Universe have a cause, most of the entire natural and social phenomena on the Earth, tracking their deciphering and knowledge. The causal explanation of the religions repartition in the territory and their regionalization represent the first coordinate of this study.

The integration principle is subordinated to the postulate which says that, generally speaking, the Geographical phenomenon and the ones regarding the religions distribution, in a special way, can’t exist by itself, isolated, without any other connections to other phenomena and processes in the geosphere. According to this principle, the religious beliefs distribution, as other Geographical facts, must be integrated into a regional context, which is then related to the whole planetary system without omitting the connection to the social, cultural, economic and political system.

The historicism principle is based on the time-factor, which has a major role in the genesis and becoming of the Geographical phenomenon, be it natural or social. Any materialized element or process in the space is the product of a dynamics, of a historical evolution. Time and the space are two concepts that cannot exist one without the other, thus appearing the expression of “geohistory”. Without studying the past of facts, for instance the beliefs of people, we cannot understand their present and, less of all, to predict the development of the events.

The regionalism principle is deduced from the Geographical research that has the tendency to identify, delineate and characterize territorial units (regions) of different dimensions included in large areas. This kind of thing results from the consideration of the natural, social and economic facts, connected with interactions and mutual influences, as regional wholes, as territorial systems. Hence, the need to regionalize the religious beliefs and practices in the world and to characterize the territorial units on which they duplicate with the idea of responding objectively to the scientific intended purpose. By efficiently using this methodological principle, it has reached the concrete delimitation and regionalization of the worldwide and universal religions into a Christian space, an Islamic one and a Buddhist one.

3. The regionalization of the worldwide and universal religions

3.1. *The Christian space (Christianity)*

Universal religions proclaim their application to all the people in the world, permanently drawing new adherents through missionary and conversion from different geographical areas or regions. The member quality of one of the worldwide religions can be gained by anyone who wants to go through a special symbolical ritual (for instance the baptism in Christianity). It does not make discriminations based on national, ethnics reasons or because of the religious beliefs practiced in the past. The three big religions of the world – Christianity, Islamism and Buddhism – gather 58% of the Globe population (3 billion believers). According to their Global numerical distribution, we tried to establish geographical types by designating such terms as *Christian space*, *Islamic space* and *Buddhist space*.

Among the universal laws, the second one, in a chronological order, after Buddhism, is *Christianity*, which is the most widely spread and the biggest religious group in the world, with over 1, 7 billion Christians (31% of the world population). After being quartered for a

long time in Europe, but also in certain spaces in western Asia or north –eastern of Africa, it experienced a fast expanse as the Europeans were settling down in the new territories in America, southern Africa, Australia, New Zealand and southern Asia. Because of the phenomenon of world Europeanization, which started in the 19th century, the geographical space dominated by Christianity started to also include the following regions: Europe with 578 million adherents (32,7% of the entire World population), Latin America with 416 million adherents (23,5%), North America with 235 million adherents (13,3%), Asia with 221 million adherents (12,5%), Africa with 295 million adherents (16,7%) and Oceania with 22 million adherents (1,2%)(figure 1).

At its occurrence, Christianity found adherents first of all in the Jewry community in the Mediterranean basin and then among the slaves and the ones released from slavery. Because it became the state religion of the Roman Empire (337 AD), in its falling epoch, Christianity entered, together with the Roman-Greek culture, the Germans' and Slavs' space. In the 4th century the Goths and the Vandals turned to the Christian faith, at the end of the 5th century the Franks and between the 6th and the 9th century it spread, step by step, to the far tribes of Bavarians, Alimones, Frisians, Anglo-Saxons so on and so forth. In the 9th and 10th century, Christianity also expanded among the Slavic people.

Entering the European countries inhabited by pagan people, Christianity didn't abolish the local religions; on the contrary, it merged with them and absorbed their ritual traditions and local mythological figures, thus reaching a religious syncretism.

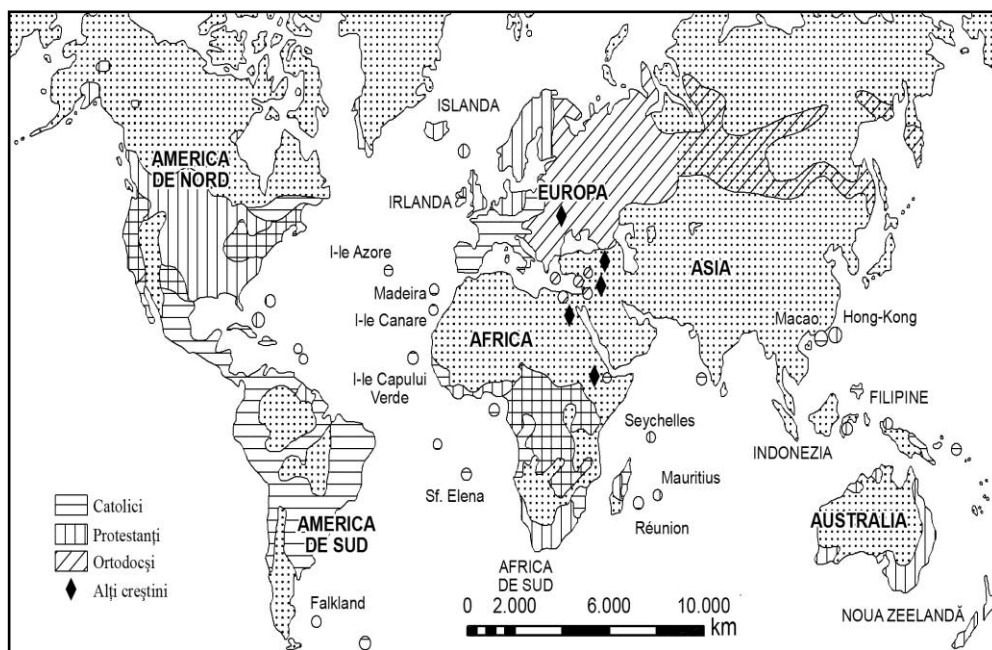


Figure 1. The geographical distribution of the Christian religion

Starting with the Great geographical discovery age, the 15th and the 16th century, Christian missionaries could spread their religion outside the Old World borders, too. Therefore, at the beginning of the 20th century the Christianity became the world most spread religion.

Nowadays, the Christian religion has three forms of confessions: Orthodox, Roman-Catholic and Protestant. *The orthodox confession* basically incorporates the eastern churches and population, its management being synodical or collegial. *The Romano-Catholic confession* belongs to that part of Christianity which developed in the Western tradition of the

Latin language, its religious centre being in Rome. The management of the Church was a monarchic, pyramidal one, the Episcopo of Rome, named Papa (Vicarius Christi), being at the top. *The protestant confession* includes many churches, split from *Romano-Catholicism* through the reforms initiated by Martin Luther, Jean Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, Henry the 8th and John Wesley. Lutheranism became dominant in Germany and Scandinavia, Calvinism in Switzerland and Netherlands, Presbyterianism in Scotland and Anglicanism (the Episcopal Church) in England.

At the end of the 4th century, when the monks in Egypt, who went to Rome, were killed with stones by the crowd, the situation got radically changed when the walls of the monasteries became the only possible redoubt against the anarchy. The papacy, whose solid institutional bases were established by Gregory the Great (590-604), legitimized and regave birth to the Empire in the year 800, through the coronation of Charles the Great as the emperor of the Roman Sacred Empire of the West in Saint Peter Basilica in Rome.

The territorial European expansion followed the evangelization of many countries. Then, after the concordat between Papa and the kings of Spain and Portugal, Christianity was solidly established in the South of America, following the conquistador's conquests: Cortes in Mexico and Pizzaro in Peru. The Jesuits, together with the Dominicans and the Franciscans, would focus their energy in order to achieve the goal of the missionary activity of the Christianization of the Amerindians. After three centuries of existence, the colonial Church ended its existence starting with the release of the states from the European countries tutorship.

The missions conducted in Africa (the Protestant and the Catholic ones) developed with an obvious success beginning with the second half of the 19th century. The spread of Christianity in Asia was much more difficult. In China, missionaries come in more stages (635, 1294, near 1600), but they could solidly implement themselves only after the opium wars (1840-1842). The mission of Francisc Xavier in Japan (1549) would be much more successful and, towards the end of the 16th century, there were already 300,000 Christians in the Nippon archipelago. Then there followed a period of persecutions which lasted until 1858, when the existence of some Crypto-Christian societies was discovered. In the south-eastern Asia area, Catholicism was imposed by the Spanish Conquista in the Philippines, starting with the year 1538, but in the Buddhist countries it faced a more significant opposition.

Despite early building churches on the West Coast of India, Christianity remained an exotic belief on the Indian subcontinent. After the Britain conquest of India (1858), many missionaries carried out a great Christianity activity, but the people who were converted did not exceed 3% of the total total. In the 20th century, Australia and New Zealand became the land where Anglicans (1788), Catholics (1838) and Protestants (1840) spread.

3.2. *The Islamic space (Mohammedanism)*

In the 7th century AD, an almost unknown nation of nomads from the Arabian Peninsula appeared on the universal History stage in a fulminate way: in less than 10 years, boosted by their new religion – *Islam* – the Arabs conquered Persia, Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine and the Egypt. For over 60 years, they owned Sicily, northern Africa and the Iberian Peninsula almost entirely; from the Pyrenees Mountains, they spread to the Loire Valley, threatening the strongest kingdom of the Merovingian Franks. In the East, they went up to the borders of India and China, and in the South-West up to the present borders of Ethiopia and Sudan. In the time when Europe was still suffering after the disastrous barbarian invasions, the Arabs played a civilization role for the West, having a great contribution to the medieval culture and European civilization.

According to the Moslem tradition, the founder of the new religion of the Arabs was *Mohamed*, an Arab from Mecca, who preached “the submission in front of God”. It was possible for him to have some “revelations” sent by God, lately written down in the holy book

of Koran and transmitted to the people. The Koran (in its translation “reading”) is the main holy book of the Moslem people, just like the Pentateuch of Moses is for the Jews and the Gospel for the Christians. The prophet *Mohamed* was born in a family of merchants from Mecca, in the Hasim family from the tribe Koreisi, around 570. At the age of 35, during his solitary meditation (in which he was all the time told to go into a cave in Mecca), he started to have visions and additive revelations. The coming years he had many revelations, many of them lately representing the Koran theology. Because of some dissensions with the ecclesiastical authorities of Mecca, in 622 Mohamed and the adherents to the new religion, were expatriated, searching a new home in Yathrib oasis in Medina, at about 100 km to the North. This exodus, named *Hegira* in the Arabic language, marked the start of the Moslem religion period. It is a known fact that the prophet died a few years later, in 632, after he arrived triumphantly in Mecca and set up a new community in Medina, made up of his first adherents, named “exiles” and from the converted from Medina, named “supporters”.

It is known that, the moment when Mohamed died, the new religion was not completely formulated, Islamism resuming some of the principles of Judaism and Christianity, which they consider as imperfect religions. Islam means *submission*, as Moslem means *submitted*, that is the one who believes in and worships God.

Representing one of the most widely spread beliefs in the whole world, a universal religion, Islamism is spread in the geographical space which includes mainly northern Africa, south-western Asia, southern and south-eastern Asia. The people of Arabic language are almost all Moslems (Mohammedans), most of them speaking Turkish and Iranian languages; there are many Moslems in the North of India and Indonesians are all Mohammedans. The number of adherents to this religion is of about 950 million, out of which 611 million live in Asia, 279 million in Africa, 53 million in Europe and 7 million in America. Among them, the people bounded through the language used (the Arabian), through traditions and common behaviours, represent a number of almost 190 million, less than 25% of the entire Moslem world, named “the Arabic world”.

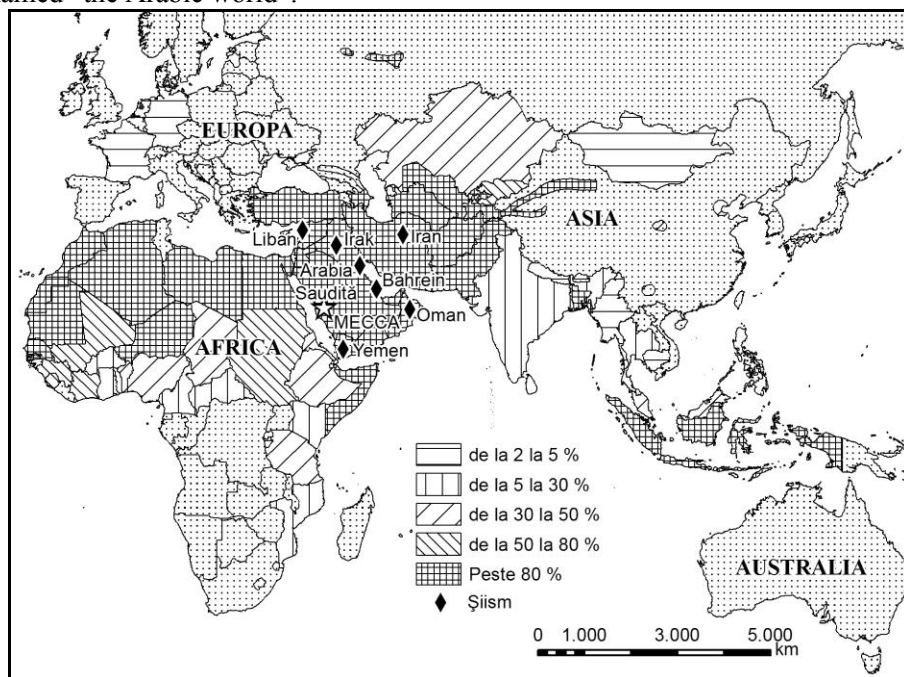


Figure 2. The map of the Moslem citizens' distribution in the world

Among the countries with a big number of Moslem beliefs, according to the 2001 statistics, we can mention: in Asia – Yemen (99%), Saudi Arabia (98%), Afghanistan (98%), Turkey (97.2), Pakistan (96.1%), UAE (96%), Jordan (96%), Iraq (96%), Iran (95.6%), Azerbaijan (93.4%), Syria (90%), Oman (87%), Turkmenistan (87%), Indonesia (87%), Bangladesh (85.8%), Kuwait (85%), Tajikistan (85%), Qatar (82.7%), Bahrain (81.8%); in Africa – Algeria (99.7%), Mauritania (99.1%), Somalia (99%), Tunisia (98.9), Morocco (98.3%), Djibouti (97.2%), Libyan (97%), The Gambia (95.4%), Senegal (92%), Egypt (90%), NE (89%), Guinea (85%), Mali (82%), Sudan (70%); in Europe – Bosnia-Herzegovina (43%), Albania (38.8%), Macedonia (30%), Yugoslavia (19%), Bulgaria (13.1%), Russia (10%), France (7.1%), Netherlands (4.5%), Germany (4.4%); in America – Suriname (19, 6%), Guyana (9%) (figure 2).

3.3. *The Buddhist space (Buddhism)*

The place of the occurrence of *Buddhism* was India, a country which occupies a strategic position between Arabia and Africa in the west, Myanmar, Malaysia and Indonesia in the East. The settlement penetrated into India following the way of the old naval and land trade routes that favoured, among other things, the entering in the first millennium BC of some innovative religious ideas.

Buddhism, the oldest of the world religions in the emergence period, played and plays a major role in the history of the peoples of Asia, in many ways being similar to what happened to Christianity in Europe and Islamism in the Near East, Middle East and northern Africa.

Today Buddhism is one of the great religions of mankind, with about 314 million believers (312 million in Asia, 1 million in America and 0.7 million in Europe), its area of distribution mainly overlapping southern and eastern Asia. Thus, according to the 2001 data, the countries with a high percentage of Buddhists are: Mongolia (96% - Lamaism Buddhism), Laos (95%), Thailand (92.6), Myanmar (87.2%), Cambodia (84.7%), Bhutan (74%), Vietnam (66.7%), Japan (69.6% - Zen Buddhism), Sri Lanka (68.4%), South Korea (48.8%), Singapore (42.5%), China (8.4%), Nepal (8.1%), Malaysia (6.6%), India (0.7%).

Except for Christianity and Islamism, Buddhism is the third religion that believes that has missionary debts to the whole world. Besides the missions organized by preachers of this faith in Europe and America, there is an intense effort to integrate Buddhism into the new realities of the contemporary world, the Buddhists campaigning vigorously in the struggle for peace and social justice.

According to the early Buddhist traditions embodied in the Pali Law, the founder of this religion was Prince Siddhartha (among 540-480 BC), later known as *Gautama*, legends often assigning him all kinds of honorific epithets as, for example, Shakyamuni - sage Sakya tribe, Tatagata – The Sublime etc. He was born in Kapilavastu, the Magadha region at the foothills of the Himalayas, in a princely family that owned the kṣatriya caste of the warriors.

Since he was young, Siddhartha left the palace and his family, giving up wealth and power in order to become an ascetic hermit. Discovering the "right path", Gautama (Buddha) began his missionary work, first at Benares (Varanasi), on the banks of the Ganges, then into a forest (where many Brahmins were hermits) and into Radjagriha, the capital of Magadha. More and more disciples and followers started to join him. After years of wandering, Buddha died and his body was cremated by his followers according to a Hindu ritual.

Buddhism experienced a fierce numerous Obedience but a general discontent occurred in the principalities of northern India, particularly in Magadha, during the 6th and 5th century BC. The ease of the rich, those slaveholders, the Brahmins, the Kṣatriya and the princes, the misery of the slaves, the oppressed peasants from the rural communities and those from the lower castes, the rivalry and power struggle between the upper castes (Brahmins and Kṣatriya), the emergence of the military dynasties, all together generated the traditional conception of the world crisis. In this environment there appeared critical theories on statute of the castes, sects and even atheistic philosophical systems, all of them spreading the socio-religious system imposed by the great *Brahma*.

4. Conclusions

The analysis of this study focused on the issue of *religious premises* or *confessional regions*, summarizing the universal religions (worldwide) through a geographic vision that aims at presenting the territorial reality. The relatively quick diffusion recorded by Christianity, Islamism and Buddhism demonstrated the importance of the perpetuation of the old habits and beliefs in space and time, new concepts and religious doctrines being born.

The teachings of Jesus Christ gradually spread throughout the world by means of missionaries, now representing the religion with the largest number of followers in the world. The Christian mission started from the centre of the religious life of the Jews, from Jerusalem, and soon spread to the major cities in the ancient Mediterranean and Pontic world. Later on, *Christianity* touched the Barbarians in northern Europe and at the end of the first millennium almost the entire European space was Christianized.

Islamism, which appeared in the Arabian Peninsula, was originally a strong reaction against polytheism, on the one hand, and against foreign domination, on the other. Therefore, the Arabs' religion combines two main elements: the religious element itself, considered as a revelation, and the human element characterized by the desire for liberation and expansion.

In Gangetic India, Siddhartha's ideas resonated more widely than within the community limits which he would build, these visions being known in the spiritual world as *Buddhism*.

References

1. Cocean P., 2002. *Geografie regională*, Edit. Presa Universitară Clujeană, Cluj-Napoca.
2. Drimba Ov., 2000). *Istoria culturii și civilizației*, vol. I-X, Edit. Saeculum I.O. & Vestala, București.
3. Eliade M., 1988. *Istoria credințelor și ideilor religioase*, vol. I-III, Edit. Științifică și Enciclopedică, București.
4. Gaudin Ph., 1995. *Marile religii*, Edit. Orizonturi & Lider, București.
5. Mara V., 2007. *Introducere în Geografia religiilor*, Edit. Casa Cărții de Știință, Cluj-Napoca.
6. Tokarev S.A., 1974. *Religia în istoria popoarelor lumii*, Edit. Politică, București.

