New Perspectives on the Changing Religious Diversity in the Great Plains

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NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE CHANGING RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IN THE GREAT PLAINS

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ABSTRACT—The religious landscape of the Plains is dominated by four major denominations: Lutherans, Catholics, Methodists, and Baptists. But beneath these prevailing majorities are others that are declining (Presbyterians) and increasing (Pentecostals and Mormons) in membership and places of worship. Jews, Muslims, Charismatics, and Baha’i are also increasing in metropolitan areas, where the greatest diversity exists. “Religious geology,” a concept that depicts religious diversity, exhibits sharp regional variations.

Key Words: denominational diversity, geography of religion, membership patterns, metropolitan-nonmetropolitan, new religious bodies, religious minorities, religious restructuring

Introduction

The religious landscape of the Great Plains is dominated by four denominations—Catholics, Baptists, Lutherans, and Methodists—each with distinct regional concentrations and more than 500,000 members or adherents (Barcus and Brunn, this issue). The largest are Catholics and Baptists (3.2 and 2.2 million each). Another dimension of the region’s heritage and evolving profile is the importance of bodies with fewer members, some with fewer than 100,000. Both the largest and smallest denominations define the region’s religious diversity, which exhibits significant variations between
metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas and in the Northern, Central, and Southern Plains.

Religious diversity is a distinctive component of the changing ethnic and social identities of any region. Despite experiencing negative natural increases, and despite outmigration from many rural counties in the Great Plains during the past five decades, many counties witnessed recent population increases (Fig. 1). Emerging metropolitan areas especially experienced these recent population increases. Some of these additions are attributed to growing numbers of foreign-born populations who, like migrants from Europe and from states east of the Plains in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, brought with them their religions and cultural practices. Some of these belief systems have persisted; others are different systems from those historically found in the Plains. In Tulsa, Oklahoma, for example, there was a 131.5% increase in the foreign-born population between 1990 and 2000; Seward County in southwest Kansas witnessed the Hispanic population grow from 9% in 1980 to 42% in 2000 (US Bureau of the Census 2001). Such shifts in population composition may indicate underlying cultural changes that belie simple descriptions of growing and declining numbers. Measuring growth or decline in religious minorities broadens our view of changes occurring in the composition of the population and captures a different dimension of the cultural change occurring in the Great Plains than is witnessed with strong majorities or pluralities.

Building on the Barcus and Brunn study (this issue), which reviews the extant literature by geographers and others on the region, we focus on identifying (1) the geographic and historical extent of religious diversity, (2) criteria to measure geographical dimensions of religious diversity, and (3) cartographic and quantitative interpretations and analyses of those patterns. Among the major questions we seek to answer are: What are the major religious minorities? Where do their members reside? Are there significant differences in the membership patterns between metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas? How can one measure religious diversity? What demographic features and geographic variables, such as isolation and population change, relate to diversity? What are the most and least religiously diverse parts of the region? Has religious diversity increased or declined in the Great Plains during the past 50 years? If yes, where are those changes evident? And to what can these patterns be related?

This paper investigates these changes in religious diversity in a region that is frequently characterized as one of population loss and decline (White 1992, 1994; Hemmasi 1995; Lonsdale and Archer 1995, 1998; Nickels and
Figure 1. Population change in the Great Plains, 1950-2000.
Day 1997; Archer and Lonsdale 2002; Hudson 2003). We discovered, as noted above, that the region's religious makeup reflects both the expansion of new religious groups and the contraction of traditional groups. Before presenting the results, we describe the study area, the data sources, and our methodology.

**Study Area, Data Sources, and Methodology**

The Great Plains, as delimited by the Center for Great Plains Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, comprises 599 counties in 10 states. The region has a strong natural resource-based economy, several metropolitan centers (Denver, Oklahoma City, Kansas City, Dallas, Tulsa, and Wichita), and many counties with small populations and low densities. Population declines have occurred throughout most of the rural areas; growth is associated primarily with major regional centers and amenity counties in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains (Zelinsky 1962; Mather 1972; Brunn and Zeigler 1981; Lonsdale and Holmes 1981; White 1992, 1994; Rathage and Highman 1998; Cromartie 1998; Brewer and Suchan 2001). The Great Plains is far from uniform in economic health and character, as there are isolated towns having marginal economies and cities experiencing social and economic change. In regard to religion, there are counties and subregions with a longstanding heritage of one or two major denominations and others where new groups are emerging and religious diversity is increasing.

We utilize the same data source as Barcus and Brunn (this issue), viz., the 2000 *Religious Congregation and Membership Series* (RCMS) published by the Glenmary Research Center (Glenmary Home Missioners 2000a, 2000b; Jones et al. 2002). This volume includes county-level data on the absolute number of members or adherents and the number of places of worship for 149 of the 285 religious bodies in the United States. These data are useful in examining variations in religious diversity at the county level. Glenmary Research Center data have been used by others, including geographers, to analyze geographic variations in the membership patterns of denominations (Johnson et al. 1974; Heatwole 1977; Shortridge 1977, 1978, 1986, 1988; Halvorson and Newman 1994; Webster 2000). These data have shortcomings, namely, they are collected on the county location of the congregation rather than the residences of members, small numbers are omitted (all participation in data gathering is voluntary), some bodies are broad (Independent Charismatic and Independent Noncharismatic), and the categories of numerical entries vary (some list members, others adherents).
Still, this database is the single most comprehensive and useful source for analyzing county membership patterns and changes in those patterns. The presentation and analysis below is based on county-level maps we prepared using ArcView 3.23 Geographic Information Systems software (ArcView 1999).

**Defining Minority Denominations**

Minority bodies are those having less than 500,000 members or adherents in 2000 in the Great Plains. Using this definition, the fifth- and sixth-largest denominations in the Plains were Pentecostals and Presbyterians, with 344,942 and 245,409 members, respectively (Table 1). The next largest were Mormons (237,074), Assembly of God (172,228), Disciples of Christ (163,364), Jews (149,235), Independent Noncharismatics (108,974), Muslims (78,418), Independent Charismatics (77,241), United Church of Christ (72,968), Seventh-day Adventists (54,957), Baha’i (11,333), and Unitarian Universalists (8,372).

This list is noteworthy because it includes not only denominations with long histories in the region (Pentecostals and Presbyterians), but also newer ones. The Presbyterian and Pentecostal profiles also are of interest because of contrasting shifts in membership. In 1952 the National Council of Churches published county-level data in *Churches and Church Membership in the United States* (1956-58). At that time there were nearly 297,000 Presbyterians and 112,000 Pentecostals. In the ensuing 50 years the Presbyterians declined while the number of Pentecostals grew threefold. Not surprisingly, the Presbyterians lost churches while the Pentecostals gained in numbers of churches. Also during this span Jews increased dramatically; Jewish adherents increased more than threefold. The number of Latter-day Saints (Mormon) churches skyrocketed from 127 to 832 from 1952 to 2000; the counties where they had adherents increased from 109 to 265.

The leading denominations, based on the number of counties where they appeared in the Plains, were Pentecostals (476) and Assembly of God (461). They were followed by Presbyterians (403), Baha’i (365), Mormons (265), and Seventh-day Adventists (253). All other groups were present in fewer than 53 counties each.

**Membership Patterns of Minority Denominations and Groups**

All minority denominations and bodies had higher metropolitan than nonmetropolitan numbers in 2000 (Table 2). Some had members or adherents in
TABLE 1
TOTAL NUMBER OF MEMBERS AND WORSHIP LOCATIONS
BY DENOMINATION, 1952, 1990, and 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious group</th>
<th>Total members</th>
<th>Total worship locations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pentecostal</td>
<td>111,498</td>
<td>223,566</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>296,713</td>
<td>276,170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latter-day Saints</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Mormon)</td>
<td>28,589</td>
<td>177,443*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assembly of God</td>
<td>89,658</td>
<td>163,830</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>49,377</td>
<td>107,441*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-charismatic</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>149,387*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charismatic</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>113,496*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seventh-Day Adventist</td>
<td>25,798</td>
<td>52,459</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baha’i</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unitarian Universalist</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>7,854</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>601,633</td>
<td>1,271,646</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Glenmary Research Center (Jones et al. 2002).
* Totals for adherents.
NA: Data not available

fewer than several dozen counties throughout the entire region (Table 3). Denver, Colorado Springs, Fort Collins, and Pueblo stand out as metropolitan concentrations in Colorado; Oklahoma City, Stillwater, and Norman in Oklahoma; Amarillo and Lubbock in Texas; Wichita and Manhattan in Kansas; Cheyenne and Casper in Wyoming; Rapid City, Brookings, and Aberdeen in South Dakota; Fargo and Grand Forks in North Dakota, and Roswell, New Mexico. These concentrations were state capitals, the largest populated counties in the state, and/or the sites of major universities. The urban concentration is particularly evident in the case of Jewish (99%) and Muslim (98%), and above 96% for Unitarian Universalist, Independent Charismatic...
and Independent Noncharismatic groups. These high percentages also inform us that there are very, very few members of some bodies living in the Plains.

In contrast to the urban concentrations described above, the membership patterns of the three largest groups are different in that the Assembly of God, Mormons, and Presbyterians had sizeable rural memberships in 2000. Also, their geographical concentrations and membership growth patterns contrast sharply. While the Assembly of God members were spread widely throughout the Plains, with their largest concentrations in urban areas of the

### TABLE 2
METRO AND NONMETRO MEMBERSHIP BY DENOMINATION, 1952, 1990, and 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious group</th>
<th>1952</th>
<th>1990</th>
<th>2000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Metro (%)</td>
<td>Nonmetro (%)</td>
<td>Metro (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pentecostal</td>
<td>37.2</td>
<td>62.8</td>
<td>68.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>37.0</td>
<td>63.0</td>
<td>69.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latter-day Saints</td>
<td>51.2</td>
<td>48.8</td>
<td>74.0*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Mormon)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assembly of God</td>
<td>39.5</td>
<td>60.5</td>
<td>70.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>94.5</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>99.7*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Non-charismatic</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>88.7*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Charismatic</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>95.5*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seventh Day Adventist</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td>61.1</td>
<td>76.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baha'i</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unitarian Universalist</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>96.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>42.9</td>
<td>57.1</td>
<td>76.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Glenmary Research Center (Jones et al. 2002).
* Totals for adherents.
NA: Data not available.
TABLE 3

PERCENT MINORITY MEMBERSHIP IN METRO COUNTIES, 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City, State</th>
<th>Pentecostal (%)</th>
<th>Presbyterian (%)</th>
<th>Mormon (%)</th>
<th>Jewish (%)</th>
<th>Independent Charismatic (%)</th>
<th>Independent Noncharismatic (%)</th>
<th>Muslim (%)</th>
<th>Baha'i (%)</th>
<th>Unitarian Universalist (%)</th>
<th>Seventh-day Adventist (%)</th>
<th>Assembly of God (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denver, CO</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>49.8</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oklahoma City, OK</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wichita, KS</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amarillo, TX</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado Springs, CO</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norman, OK</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manhattan, KS</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapid City, SD</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stillwater, OK</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lubbock, TX</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pueblo, CO</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billings, MT</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Falls, MT</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Forks, ND</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fargo, ND</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheyenne, WY</td>
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<td>0.6</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laramie, WY</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casper, WY</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Island, NE</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roswell, NM</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boulder, CO</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dallas, TX</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tulsa, OK</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage Urban*</td>
<td>77.6</td>
<td>71.7</td>
<td>74.9</td>
<td>99.3</td>
<td>98.1</td>
<td>96.4</td>
<td>98.3</td>
<td>71.1</td>
<td>96.3</td>
<td>79.4</td>
<td>72.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Glenmary Research Center (Jones et al. 2002).

*Includes only primary urban county.
Central and Southern Plains, Presbyterians were found mostly in the Central Plains, especially in Kansas, Nebraska, and eastern Colorado, but also in a few major urban centers in the Southern Plains (Figs. 2, 3, and 4). In addition to concentrations in urban and urban-adjacent counties around Denver, the Mormons also have large concentrations in western Wyoming and Montana.

**Measuring Religious Diversity and “Religious Geology”**

There are a number of criteria that might be employed to measure geographical expressions of religious diversity within a county, state, or more extensive region. These include mapping the leading denomination’s share of all members or adherents in a county or the combined percentages of the top two or three denominations. Shortridge (1977, 1978) calculated and mapped an “index of diversity” that reflected the concentration of denominations in each US county. His maps “Religious Diversity 1971” showed the highest values (indicative of a few denominations) in western North Dakota, eastern Montana, and the Texas panhandle. The lowest values (more diversity) were in Kansas, Nebraska, eastern Colorado, and eastern Wyoming. His 1978 map of American Catholicism showed the highest percentages of the total population were in North and South Dakota, northeastern New Mexico, and south-central Colorado, and the lowest percentages were in southeast Nebraska, eastern and central Kansas, and Oklahoma.

Still other county-level diversity measures could be utilized, including the total number of religious bodies, the number of bodies with less than 1% or 2% of all members, and those religious bodies with only one place of worship. Of these, we selected two measures: the total number of religious denominations and the number of denominations with only one place of worship in each county (Figs. 5 and 6). A county or subregion with a large number of bodies illustrates religious diversity, while the corollary reflects a lack of diversity. Figure 5 shows the largest number of denominations or groups in the region’s largest cities, including Denver, Oklahoma City, and Wichita, and regional centers and university towns, including Abilene, Manhattan, Rapid City, and Fargo. Aside from the greater diversity in these large urban areas, which one would expect, there was an emerging rural diversity along Interstate 94 in eastern Montana, I-27 in panhandle Texas, and I-80 in central Nebraska. On the other hand, areas with much denominational similarity were western Kansas, west Texas, and central North and South Dakota; these are strongholds of Baptists, Catholics, and Lutherans, respectively. Figure 6, showing counties with only one place of worship for a religious
Figure 2. Presbyterian church membership, 2000.
Figure 3. Assembly of God church membership, 2000.
Figure 4. Mormon adherents, 2000.
Figure 5. Total number of religious denominations or groups in the Great Plains, 2000.
Figure 6. Number of religious denominations having a single place of worship, 2000.
body, is somewhat similar to Figure 5. The number of places of worship for a given denominational group might indicate its importance to a community. For example, a single place of worship could depict either a denomination in decline or the emergence of a new denomination. Two or more places of worship would suggest a minimum threshold of stability. The number of worship locations is not necessarily indicative of strength; rather, multiple locations suggest a variety of approaches to worship within a given denomination, which might be considered an indication of diversity within that denomination. Many large cities and regional centers along interstate highways exhibit this manner of diversity. A lack of diversity is especially evident in Texas panhandle counties and those in north-central Nebraska and central South Dakota.

**Regional Cultures and Religious Diversity**

A useful context in which to examine regional variations in religious dominance and mixing is offered by political scientist Daniel Elazar’s (1966) discussion of regional political cultures. These cultures evolved from east–west migrations, each of which had distinctive features, including views about the individual and society and the role and responsibilities of local, state, and national governments (Archer and Shelley 1986). The Great Plains for much of the past two centuries has been a transit region for thousands of newcomers moving from east to west, either coming directly from various regions within Europe or earlier settled states in the eastern United States. Elazar mapped the dominant “cultural streams” (his term) across the US during the past two centuries. The Northern Plains was settled by those coming from northern Europe directly and/or from Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Iowa. The Central Plains was settled by those coming from Iowa and also Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri. The Southern Plains received settlers from a variety of different origins, including Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Tennessee, and also the Deep South and east Texas. Eastern New Mexico settlers’ origins are tied to the Texas panhandle, and new residents in eastern Colorado were from Nebraska and Kansas. Those in eastern Wyoming and Montana have roots in Nebraska and the Dakotas, respectively (Zelinsky 1973, 2001). The major ethnic groups that settled the Northern Plains were Norwegians, Swedes, Finns, Danes, and Germans; the Central Plains experienced large influxes of Germans in the nineteenth century, and also Irish and English. The Southern Plains were settled also by Germans, Irish, English, as well as African Americans and
Mexican Americans (Allen and Turner 1988; Zeigler and Brunn 2000). Other geographers have identified key features of these basically latitudinal patterns (see Zelinsky 1973; Hudson 1988; Hart 2003; Hudson 2003).

Elazar used the regional cultures to identify three dominant political cultures: Moralistic, Individualistic, Traditionalistic, and various combinations. Each has distinctive cultural hearths and regional concentrations. These descriptive, not evaluative, labels aid in understanding the diversities in political cultures that coexist. Moralistic was identified with the Northern and Central Plains; Individualistic with Wyoming, Texas, southern Kansas, and Oklahoma; and Traditionalistic with parts of Oklahoma and panhandle and north Texas. His innovative maps of political cultures illustrate both the dominant culture in each state and the regions where there are mixes, as one would expect where multiple migration streams intersect. Religion was an integral component of the cultures that emerged (Meyer 1975). With respect to specific denominations, the Congregational, Lutheran, and Catholic churches were strongest in the Northern Plains, the Methodists and, to a lesser extent, Presbyterians in the Central Plains, and the Baptists and Catholics in the Southern Plains (Paullin and Wright 1932; Gaustad 1962; Gaustad and Barlow 2001). Zelinsky (1973) identified and mapped several “major religious regions” in these subregions of the Plains: an Upper Middle Western region (Nebraska, the Dakotas, and eastern Montana), a Midland region (Kansas and north-central Oklahoma), and a Southern region (parts of the Texas panhandle, eastern New Mexico, and south-central and panhandle Oklahoma).

A second useful construct is Elazar’s concept of “political geology,” which reflects changes in the political culture and ethnic diversity within a region. Elazar wrote:

The overall pattern of political cultures is not easily portrayed. Not only must the element of geography be considered, but also a kind of human or cultural “geology” that adds another dimension to the problem. . . . [D]ifferent currents of migration have passed over the American landscape in response to the various frontiers of national development. These currents . . . have left residues of population in various places to become the equivalent of geological strata. As these populations settled in the same location, sometimes side by side, sometimes overlapping, and frequently on top of one another, they created hardened cultural mixtures that must be sorted out for analytical purposes, city by city and county by county from the Atlantic to the Pacific.
The various sequences of migration in each locale have determined the particular layering of the cultural geography of each state. Even as the strata were being deposited over generations and centuries, externally generated events, such as depressions, wars, and internal cultural conflicts, caused upheavals that altered the relative positions of the various groups in the community. The passage of time and the impact of new events have eroded some cultural patterns, intensified others, and modified still others, to make each local situation even more complex. (Elazar 1966, 95-96)

Brunn (2003) uses Elazar’s “geology” or layering notion to discuss and graph profiles of the varying “ethnic strata” or “ethnic geomorphology” in a sample of rural and urban US counties. These ethnic strata vary, as expected, depending on the intensity and diversity of the historical and contemporary migration streams that have crisscrossed the nation or region such as the Great Plains during the past several centuries. Ethnic diversity or complexity represents a significant component to understanding a region’s social and cultural geographies (Zelinsky 1988; Frantz and Sauder 1996; Roseman et al. 1996; McKee 2000; Frazier and Margai 2003).

“Religious Geology”

We extend Elazar’s “political geology” concept further by using it to examine salient features of the religious landscape of any region. Those strata or layers would include members of the dominant denominations and also those with small numbers. Elazar recognized the important role that religion has played in the political cultures that emerged. He wrote, “The correlations between religious affiliation and political culture are clear and striking” (Elazar 1966, 95). He also valued Gaustad’s *Historical Atlas of Religion in America* for its “maps showing the spread of religious denominations as of 1950, which are very useful in following the pattern of political culture as well” (Elazar 1966, 95).

We introduce the concept “religious geology” to represent and illustrate the religious diversity or different strata or “layers” of religious denominations or bodies. Each denomination or religious group in a county or region represents a stratum. These strata could be examined in historical or contemporary contexts. They would reveal the impresses of those groups with long traditions in a place, that is, their strata may be “deep” and have a high percentage of all religious members and adherents, or they may be “thin” and recent, that is, the result of very recent migration streams. Just as
the Great Plains is a region that contains many different ethnic mixes reflecting its past and present, so we would expect to discover the “religious strata” to vary in the Northern, Central, and Southern Plains.

**Mapping Religious Geology and Diversity**

To illustrate the “religious geology” concept, we selected six rural and six metropolitan counties using the Glenmary data (Figs. 7 and 8). The rural or nonmetropolitan counties illustrate different population and religious diversity profiles, including counties whose population is rapidly increasing or sharply declining and others that are long distances from interstates and major cities. One can discern from Figure 7 differences in the composition of the religious “layers” in rural North Dakota and Montana from those in Kansas, Colorado, and Texas. Catholics and Lutherans are major denominations in the Northern Plains, Methodists and Catholics in the Central Plains, and Baptists and Methodists in the Southern Plains. Between 1952 and 2000, three of the six rural counties increased in diversity. The total number of religious groups grew and the proportion of members captured by leading denominations declined as smaller religious groups emerged. The metropolitan counties have similar denominational profiles and, not unexpectedly, many more bodies. Both Oklahoma City and Denver in 2002 had more than 60 different groups, followed closely by Wichita with 56. Catholics were most numerous in four of the six metropolitan counties, but were most numerous in only one of the rural counties. The “Other” categories comprise many different religious strata. The total number of groups present in each of the six urban counties increased from 1952 to 2000. In all except one of the urban counties, unlike in the rural counties, the proportion of membership in “Other” religious groups declined, suggesting an increased concentration in the leading denominations in 2000. The changes in membership and religious diversity illustrated in the selected rural and metropolitan counties depicted in Figures 7 and 8 mirror the regionwide dynamics described in previous sections. These changes are evident in the Northern, Central, and Southern Plains as well as in small rural and large metropolitan counties.

**Understanding Religious Diversity through Population Change**

To explore further the connections between population change and religious diversity, we mapped changes in population and corresponding changes in the number of denominations in each county (diversity) between
1952 and 2000. We identified six patterns in the county-level data: (1) an increase both in population and in religious diversity (206 counties), (2) increase in population and stability (no change) in diversity (14 counties), (3) increase in population and decrease in diversity (5 counties), (4) decrease in...
population and increase in diversity (174 counties), (5) decrease in population and stability in diversity (69 counties), and (6) decrease in both population and religious diversity (131 counties). There were no counties in the study area that had the same population in 1950 as in 2000.
These six patterns are depicted in Figure 9. Four primary patterns are evident on this map. First, areas of population and diversity increase are concentrated at the periphery of the region and in urban areas and growth counties. Second, areas of declining population and diversity form a central core of the region running north to south from North Dakota to central Texas. The areas of increasing population and stable diversity and areas of declining population and increasing diversity form a buffer area between the two other extremes, possibly indicating a process of change that occurs as the distance from the periphery or a growth area increases. Not surprisingly, areas of growth correspond with metropolitan areas and their suburbs; these 206 counties, which grew in population during these nearly five decades, also increased in diversity. At the other end of the spectrum, there were 131 counties that declined in population and also declined in their diversity. The most interesting changes, however, are in areas of population decline and diversity increase (174 counties) or stability (69 counties). Many counties in Montana fall into one of these categories, while others are scattered throughout the central Great Plains. Despite population loss, it appears that counties in the Great Plains are experiencing a religious restructuring; these are the new strata in the region’s “religious geology.”

While cartographic presentations are instructive for measuring and understanding changes in denominational diversity, other, more sophisticated measures might be considered, including religious and denominational switching (no county-level data are available for this practice). One could use a regression model and measure the amount of a county’s religious diversity with 1950-2000 population change, and isolation variables (as measured by the distance to the nearest metropolitan place and by straight-line distance to the nearest interstate highway). It is not surprising that population change positively influences diversity, while degree of isolation has a negative influence. Compared to counties in the northern subregion of the Great Plains, those in the central subregion had greater diversity. The diversity of this central region is confirmed in the maps in Barcus and Brunn (this issue) and Shortridge (1977, 1978, 1986). The southern subregion, not surprisingly, is the least diverse. The multiple regression model explained only 17% of the total variation. Given the low $R^2$ value, it is clear that many other factors, some of which may be difficult to measure (or obtain comparable county data for), influence religious diversity and need to be considered in further statistical models analyzing religious change in the Great Plains. In short, both the statistical and cartographic analyses yield many unanswered questions, questions that beg for further inquiry.
Figure 9. Population change and change in religious diversity, 1952-2000.
Geographers and others studying the dynamics of denominational change and denominational restructuring would also be advised to examine the statistical models and theories of sociologists and others who study religious and denominational switching (Newport 1979; Kluegel 1980). Methodological issues are an integral part of these inquiries, as sociologists especially examine the role of social networks, age, gender, and occupational mobility in modeling opportunities for religious switching (Whitt et al. 1988; Skerkat 1990; Babchuk and Whitt 1990; Whitt and Babchuk 1992). While geographical location and distance to “shop” for churches are not integral in this sociological research, geographical issues are recognized as being important. Whitt and Babchuk (1992) acknowledge the importance of geographical variables:

Religious mobility is not constrained by limitations on the number of persons switching denominations. Indeed, new memberships (the analogue of jobs) can be created at will. Growth cannot cause switching; it is a dependent variable caused by switching and, in the natural setting but not in sample surveys, by natural increase. In this regard, the proper theoretical analogy is geographical mobility rather than the dynamics of the job market. Just as population change in cities, states, and regions is completely determined by rates of in-migration, out-migration, and natural increase or decrease, changes over time in the membership of denominations are a product of rates of conversion and defections and by gains and losses associated with birth and death. (Whitt and Babchuk 1992, 208)

**Summary and Future Directions**

This inquiry into the membership patterns of religious bodies with small numbers and religious diversity is a useful addition to the scholarly research about the Great Plains. While the majority of members or adherents are Lutherans and Catholics in the north, Methodists in the central, and Baptists and Catholics in the south, the membership patterns of small bodies illustrate there is significant diversity, or “religious geology.” We introduce two new measures of diversity to capture some of the variation at the county level. That mosaic character is further illustrated by some other long-standing denominations in the region and those that have grown rapidly in recent decades, especially Pentecostals and Mormons, and more recently, Muslims and Baha’i religion. It is mostly the large urban centers in the region—
Denver, Oklahoma City, Wichita, and Amarillo—that exhibit the greatest diversity. The “islands” of diversity, which are also state capitals and sites of major public universities, are offset by parts of the rural Plains where there has been little religious diversity currently or historically. Population change is not the most important predictor of changes in diversity, and when the two are overlaid it is clear that the religious structure in the Great Plains is influenced by other factors, possibly economic structure of land-use changes.

Six basic questions emerge that merit further study. One would be to analyze and map the membership patterns of other minority bodies at the county level using not only the recent Glenmary data but the 1952 bulletins of the National Council of Churches (1956-58; Zelinsky 1961). These historical and geographical inquiries would help us unravel when and where the diversity first emerged. Second, one could study the membership patterns of other denominational minorities, for example, Episcopalians, Friends, International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, and Seventh-day Adventists, to determine whether their memberships are strongly regional or a mix of rural and urban members. Third, one could take a closer look at the Central Plains, which is experiencing much dynamism, that is, Presbyterians are losing members and Pentecostals, Mormons, and Charismatics are increasing. (This region is a stronghold of Methodists, who also lost members in both metropolitan and rural counties save for a handful.) Are the elderly members of mainline denominations being replaced by new migrants with different religious views, or do the changes reflect a shift from an agricultural to service economy, or are we seeing denominational switching? Fourth, we could mine data from the 1916 Census of Religious Bodies (US Census of Population 1919) to identify the denominational mixes 90 years ago. For example, there were eleven Lutheran bodies in North Dakota, six Methodist and three Presbyterian bodies in Oklahoma, and two Mennonite bodies in South Dakota. Fifth, and in a contemporary context, it would be worth studying how members or adherents of these minority bodies are served by their own or other clergy. The time/space activity patterns of part-time and interdenominational 21st-century “circuit riders” would yield some fascinating findings about the nature of religious activities and services provided to traditional small and nascent groups. Sixth, the denominational-switching literature begs for an understanding of geographical variations. The research by sociologists studying religious switching, whether to denominations with similar “cognitive maps” of the distances of other denominations from one’s own (to use the term offered by Rokeach [1960]), would be strengthened by considering the variations in place and region discussed above—metropolitan and
nonmetropolitan, growing and declining population, and North, Central and Southern Plains. These and other inquiries into the region’s religious past and present will continue to merit the attention of scholars in the social sciences and humanities, whether they investigate individual denominations or individual churches within several rural counties, metropolitan areas, or one in a large subregion, and whether they work within their own disciplinary traditions or engage in cross-disciplinary inquiry.

References


