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## Great Plains Region from *Encyclopedia of Religion in America*, volume 2

Robert H. Stoddard

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, rstoddard1@unl.edu

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## Great Plains Region

To understand the religions of a region, it is helpful to examine its environmental characteristics and the history of human occupation of that land because interpretations and forms of worship often reflect the environment with which believers cope. Although characteristics of the natural environment are intricately incorporated into most ancient religions, this relationship may be less obvious in religions with creeds and set of beliefs enunciated by historic figures. Here focus is on how the religious history of the Great Plains distinguishes it from other parts of America.

### *Defining the Great Plains Region*

Comments about the distinctiveness of the Great Plains are dependent on its definitional boundaries, which involve regionalization: the division of the Earth's surface into areas that simplify the tremendous variations in one or more phenomena. Regions are established in the same way classes are defined, namely, in a manner that minimizes the variations within each one and maximizes the differences among them.

The task of regionalization is often complicated because some boundaries realistically are transitional zones, where the characteristics of one area shade gradually into an adjoining one. In the case of the Great

Plains, for example, the eastern edge merges almost imperceptibly into what is considered the Midwest.

According to common understanding, the Great Plains is regarded as distinct on the basis of two factors: location and climate. The location refers to its position in the interior of the United States. In contrast to most other regions, no part of the Great Plains region has a coastal border. This interior position affects the way at least two major factors are distributed across the country.

One factor is the region's general dryness. Being a long ways from the maritime sources of moisture, much of the Great Plains receives limited precipitation and is defined as semiarid. This climatic condition, in turn, has affected the population density of the region. Although much of the land was filled by Euro-American farmers and small towns in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, within half a century de-population began. Farmers realized that under a system of commercial agriculture, the number of crops that could be grown profitably in a dry climate was limited. Even though irrigation could compensate for the lack of moisture, it required a large investment, which led to consolidation of farm ownership. This trend continued as most rural counties in the Great Plains lost population when farm families, along with the persons providing small town services, left and moved to urban areas.

Combined with the physical limitations of a dry climate is the isolation of the region from major markets. The distance to markets, both domestic metropolises and port cities with foreign connections, greatly limits the economic viability of the region. This isolation is exacerbated because even regional markets tend to be located on the periphery of the Great Plains. This factor of inaccessibility tends to complicate efforts to overcome the limitations of climate. The net effect is a region that has experienced, and continues to experience, rural depopulation, along with developing several attitudes and perspectives associated with declining communities.

The low population density, especially in nonmetropolitan areas, affects the cultural milieu in innumerable ways. It is related to the frequency individuals interact with others, the diversity in personal interactions, the availability of social and commercial services, the kind and size of public events, the time spent in traveling to work and school, and the laws enacted for low-density situations. Apprehension about the population decline permeates the cultural climate and religious perspective of the region.

The factor of location has contributed also to the history of the Great Plains, with settlement by Euro-Americans occurring later than in several other parts of the country. During the earliest years of intrusion into Native Americans' land, the expansion was justi-

fied in terms of Manifest Destiny. The land was primarily traversed from the settled East to the new lands of the West. Later, following the Civil War, the land was occupied rapidly for a few decades. This region, therefore, is distinctive because it lacks both a long history and the prospects for economic growth that are more common elsewhere in America.

These criteria of dryness and isolation apply equally to parts of Canada, but here the focus is only on the United States, which means the northern extent of the Great Plains is defined by the international boundary. On the west, the region is delineated by the mountains and the resultant climatic divide. The southern boundary, which is partly defined by the international boundary with Mexico, corresponds to the Bolcones Escarpment, which excludes the area identified as the Texas Gulf Coast.

The delineation of the eastern edge of the Great Plains, however, differs greatly because of variations in the criteria utilized. In an attempt to discover a consensus, Rossum and Lavin examined fifty published versions of the regional boundaries. They discovered all the versions of the eastern boundary generally lie along two paths. The more restrictive path approximates the 98<sup>th</sup> meridian, which means the eastern portion of the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas are not regarded as part of the Great Plains. The other path places the eastern boundary at the Mississippi River, but excludes Louisiana and often Arkansas and Missouri. For the *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains*, the editor compromised these two sets of lines by utilizing the state boundaries of the Dakotas, Nebraska, and Kansas for the eastern boundary. According to this definition, the region encompasses approximately six hundred counties in ten states. This is the definition generally accepted here, but it is expanded to include the transitional states of Minnesota and Iowa.

Further refinement in the description of this region is achieved by noting internal differences. A major locational factor that must be acknowledged when generalizing about the Great Plains is the contrast between rural and urban areas. This differentiation is important because, to use one illustration, the population is declining in most of the region, while it is increasing in the urban areas. Since most of the major cities situated within the boundaries defined for this region are on its periphery, one could logically argue that they are not truly a part of "the Great Plains."

Another factor contributing to internal variations with the Great Plains is implied by the fact several geographers consider the 98<sup>th</sup> meridian as differentiating the physical landscape lying to the west of this line from that to the east. Differences are reflected also by the socio-economic association with livestock ranchers in the west and crop farmers in the east.

In spite of these internal differences, the question arises about the applicability of defining a region that will aid in understanding religious variations. Are there characteristics of religion that are distinctive in this part of the United States?

### *Distinctive Characteristics of Religion*

Differentiating the religious behavior in the Great Plains from that in other regions of the United States can be approached by examining the areal distribution of various components of religion. Even though studying maps of religious characteristics provides an effective way of detecting regional differences, this technique possesses limitations.

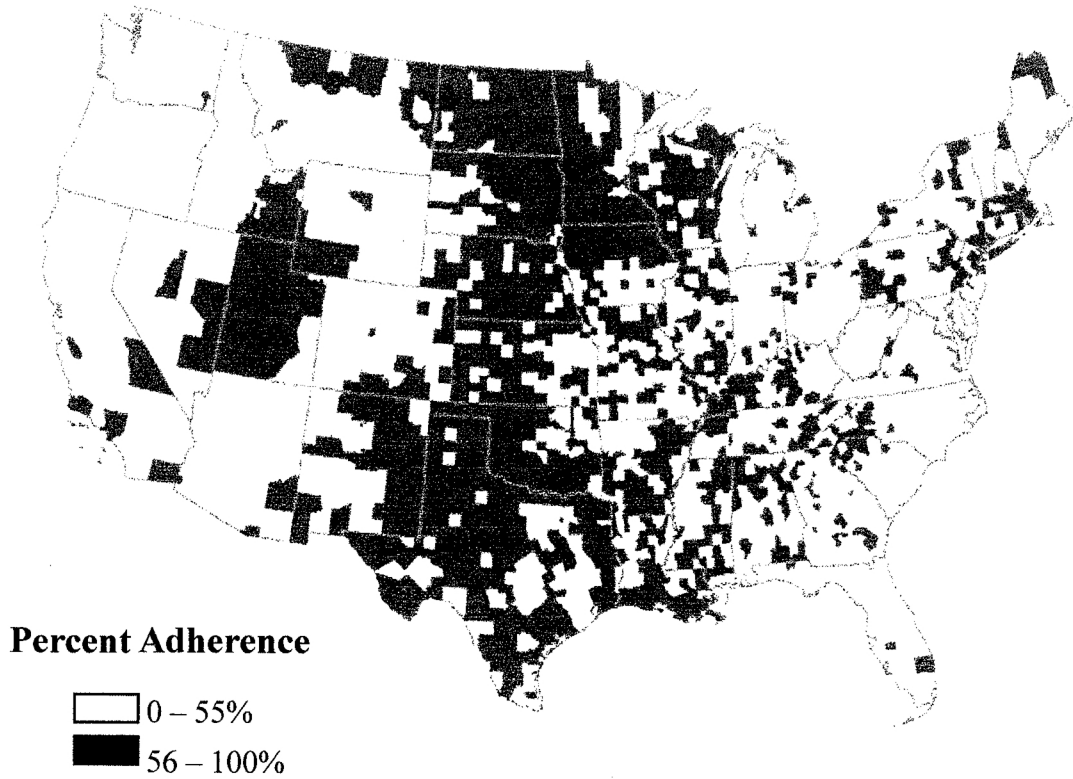
One problem concerns what constitutes a particular religious group (which here is called a *denomination*, irrespective of its spiritual perspective and organizational characteristics). The task is straight-forward for many denominations because they exist as established religious bodies; consequently data on their memberships have been collected and thus can facilitate discerning patterns. However, for several groups, especially those following a New Age belief or a recent variant of an Asian religion, questions about their religiousness and "membership" complicate the collection of data. Furthermore, even for the more mainstream denominations, comparisons among them are complicated by different definitions of what constitutes membership.

Closely related to this problem is the task of grouping the multitude of denominations into meaningful categories, which is necessary for forming generalizations. Here broad terms for the four leading denominations of Lutheran, Catholic, Baptist, and Methodist are examined, but with the recognition that within each of these major groupings are smaller denominations (except for the Catholics). Although the subgroups within each general denomination may retain similar names and/or institutional structures, their beliefs and practices often vary considerably.

Another problem encountered when analyzing spatial data concerns the size of the areal unit from which statistics are collected. The generalizations stated here arise primarily from analyzing religious data for counties, which constitute a good compromise between data for entire states and for individual towns or census districts. Of course this decision affects, for instance, the observed degree of religious diversity because larger areal units normally enclose a greater number of denominations.

One characteristic having relevance is religious adherence, which is measured by the percentage of church members in a given population. Even though mere membership in a church does not necessarily indicate congregants' theological positions, attitudes about social issues, or degrees of involvement, the number of

# Religious Adherence



Map 1. Religious Adherence as a Percent of County Population, 2000  
From Jordan, 2007

persons belonging to various denominations in each county generates an indicator of religious differences. In spite of these limitations, this statistic provides a practical index to the concept of religiousness.

The mapping of church adherence for U.S. counties by geographer Lisa Jordan reveals a high level of adherence within the boundaries of the Great Plains. In the central part of the United States, a major north-south swatch of counties has percentages of 55 percent or above. With exceptions of the "Mormon region" in the west and some scattered counties in the east, the area of high adherence coincides well with the region defined as the Great Plains. Evidence that the counties with high adherence do form a distinctive regionalism is further supported by an analysis of spatial clustering – that is, the degree to which adjacent counties are similar. Jordan found this index of clustering to be moderately strong in this part of United States. In summary, counties in which church adherence is relatively high form a region that does, indeed, coincide with the area defined as the Great Plains.

Even though the distribution of high religious adherence in the United States exposes the distinctiveness of the Great Plains, internal variations do exist. In addition to the western counties having lower percentages than the eastern ones, there is a north-south divergence, with the central portion having lower levels than in the north and south. Differences also reflect the degree of urbanization, with urban counties generally displaying lower adherence than rural ones.

Another pattern of religion can be produced by determining the denominational diversity within each county. Measuring the degree to which residents in each county differ in their religious beliefs and practices is difficult because of the many internal variations within most denominations, which are accentuated when grouped into broad categories. In addition, the lack of data for some religious groups complicates a precise measurement of diversity.

The spatial distribution of religious diversity in the United States does not match the one of adherence and, therefore, does not depict a pattern that corresponds closely to the Great Plains. To illustrate, many contiguous counties in Texas and Oklahoma show little diversity, but this homogeneity does not extend to other broad areas of the Great Plains. Also complicating a spatial generalization is the observation that the eastern edge of this subregion is indistinct. Even though more diversity generally occurs in the northern portions of the Great Plains, counties with the highest diversity tend to be scattered. This characteristic undoubtedly reflects the fact that adjacent rural counties with smaller and more homogeneous populations contain fewer different denominations, while urbanized counties normally have higher population densities

that support a greater variety of churches.

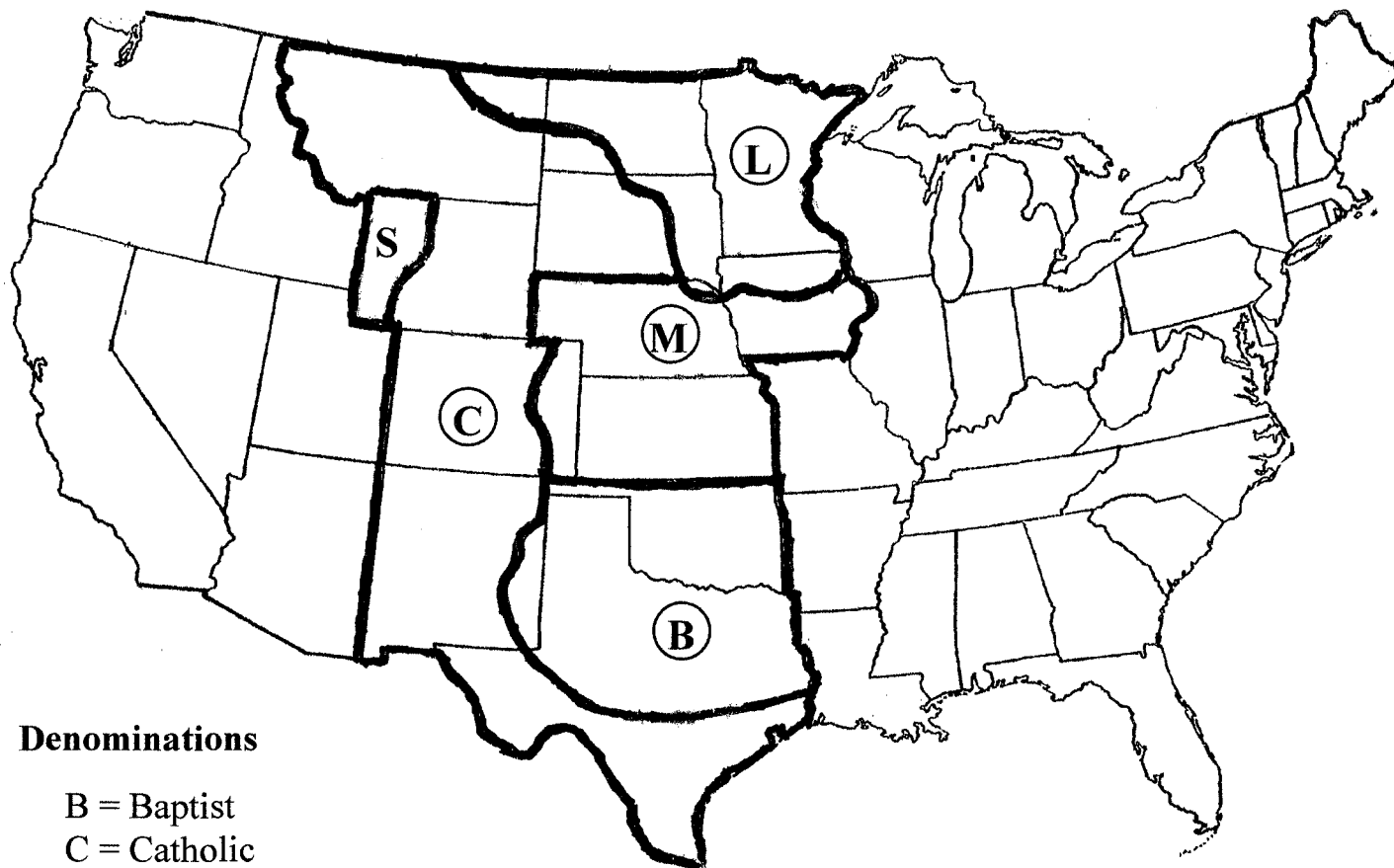
The locations of members of the four leading denominations generally cluster into subregions. Baptists are concentrated in Oklahoma and most of Texas; and Lutherans are the dominant denomination in Minnesota, most of North Dakota, eastern South Dakota, and northern Iowa. Catholic counties include most of Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, and southern Texas. The Catholic region also extends into western South Dakota; and Catholicism is common (it ranks second) in the "Lutheran" region. Except for a relatively small area in western Wyoming where the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is the plurality denomination, the remaining part of the Great Plains might be identified either as Methodist or "mixed." In this subregion, which covers Nebraska, Kansas, and southern Iowa, the pattern of counties showing a particular denominational strength is scattered. Although Methodism is the plurality denomination in many counties, they are not contiguous.

### *A Historical Perspective*

Understanding these patterns of religion is enhanced by reviewing a few historical components of the region and denominations. The non-Native American population migrated into this region predominately from the 1860s until the 1920s. Settlement replicated the normal flows of migration as newcomers clustered into ethnic and religious communities. In some cases, these aggregations were initiated by European religious leaders who brought many congregants to this newly "opened" land. This selectivity in destinations resulted in subregional variations in the population. In the northeastern portion of the Great Plains the settlement was dominated by Scandinavians and Germans; in the central by Germans, Irish, and English; and in the south by Germans, Irish, English, African-Americans, and Mexican-Americans.

In the early years of settlement, the cultural outlook was a mixture of both independence and dependence. Immigrants, by their willingness to leave the security of family and community of their original homes, became deeply involved with solving their physical needs and establishing a functional society in this "new" land. Independence in thought and practice was characteristic of the people who had left traditional cultures and were facing new and difficult challenges. Simultaneously, the population of the Great Plains was highly dependent on outside economic forces. Policies regarding land ownership were made by the government in Washington, D.C.; markets for agricultural products, which were critical for economic survival, were located outside the region; and the transportation of goods was highly dependent on railroads owned by outsiders.

## Denominational Regions



### Denominations

B = Baptist

C = Catholic

L = Lutheran

M = Methodist

S = Latter Day Saints



The characteristics of the Great Plains underwent numerous changes in the first half of the twentieth century. Although the "Dust Bowl" and "Great Depression" were dramatic, these events represented conditions that extended over a longer period. The initial euphoria generated by advertisements luring prospective settlers, by several years of sufficient rainfall, and by periods of good prices for agricultural goods was soon replaced by more realistic awareness of the limitations of the region. Farmers eventually realized that the fluctuating cycles of wetter and drier weather could result in cycles when precipitation in the Great Plains would be insufficient for arable crops. When these adverse weather conditions coincided with economic recessions, many families abandoned their homes and moved to other regions of the United States. The rural depopulation that was publicized widely in the 1930s actually commenced with the turn of the century and has continued since then.

These climatic and economic conditions apply particularly to the "core" of the Great Plains. At the eastern edge of the region where physical characteristics merge into the Midwest, the effects of drier years is lessened and the accessibility of markets is increased. On the western edge, where the aridity was always accepted as a given, the land is utilized for ranching. This does not mean generalizations about the Great Plains do not apply to the entire region, but they tend to be especially typical of the central north-south swatch.

In more recent decades, the climatic problem of aridity has been partly solved for crop farmers by investing in irrigation, but recent controversy over the access to ground and surface water has become a restraint. The economic dependence on outside markets persists. In rural counties, depopulation continues as commercial farming operates with larger landholdings and many small farmers abandon the land and seek employment elsewhere, usually in urban centers, either within the Great Plains or in other regions. These changes result in rural areas continuing to reflect traditional cultural characteristics while urban centers resemble the mixtures of American population in general.

Associated with these changes in the economic and cultural history of the region are religious characteristics. When early immigrants established a new society in a strange land, church membership was often important. When a community was dominantly one ethnic group, the church was a vital component of community life. Where towns were less ethnically homogeneous, several denominations often built churches and competed for new members. As rural communities declined with depopulation, many open-country and small town churches disappeared. The remaining ones, however, frequently increased their importance because they continued to serve the societal need for belonging to a community.

In contrast, religion in urban areas became more denominationally diversified as arrivals came from numerous formerly homogeneous communities within the region and from a variety of foreign areas. With the tremendous variety of organizations and social opportunities, the role of urban churches has varied. Survival for some has meant expanding their mission to include an assortment of activities, while others maintain their strength through strong ethnic identity and sense of community.

### *Differences among Four Denominations*

Additional understanding of religion in the Great Plains can be gained by noting some of the differences among denominational histories and current significance. Main attention is given here to the major Christian groups of today and to the dominant religion prior to the mid nineteenth century, but a fewer non-Christian religious organizations are also discussed briefly.

Christian religions were introduced into the Great Plains first by Catholic priests who accompanied Spanish explorers into what is now New Mexico and Texas. Not only was this nonindigenous religion located in just a small portion of the region but the number of adherents was relatively small. This denomination grew in importance when Catholic Euro-Americans migrated into the area and became part of the resident population. Nearly a third of the Germans, who constituted approximately a fourth of European immigrants in the last half of the nineteenth century, were Catholic. The Irish, who also were a significant segment of the immigrant population into the Great Plains, also increased the Catholic population. A century later, Catholics from Latin America and Southeast Asia became a significant part of the immigrant population.

In spite of the nineteenth century prevalence of hostility to Catholics by many evangelicals who regarded Protestantism as the "national" religion, growth of the Catholic population also occurred through conversions. By the end of the twentieth century, the distributional pattern of Catholics in the Great Plains revealed their importance throughout the region. Although the Catholic subregion suggests a concentration in the western portion of the Great Plains, Catholics are numerically important in many counties elsewhere, especially in the areas settled by Germans, such as in the Lutheran subregion.

The pattern produced by counties with high percentages of Catholics does not necessarily reveal their numerical importance in urban areas, where the proportion of all Catholics is considerably greater than for the other three denominations examined here. Because of the diversity of denominations, the percentage of Catholics in urban centers is diluted, which affects the map of denominational strength by counties; nevertheless,

their sizeable total makes them a major religious institution in the Great Plains.

Lutheranism became a significant part of the religious landscape in the Great Plains with the immigration of Scandinavians and Germans in the second half of the nineteenth century. This religious affiliation persisted so the area where they settled now forms a Lutheran region today. Although this areal concentration suggests a religious homogeneity, diversity of beliefs occurs within this denominational grouping because a multitude of synods, based on ethnic heritage and geographic origins, merged and re-combined through time. Diversity within the subregion also results because several counties having Catholic communities, with similar geographic roots, are intermixed with the Lutheran ones.

Later generations of Lutherans have moved to urban areas so the original rural communities are no longer the overwhelming residential setting, but the remaining ones retain the strengths of religious affiliation. In small towns that have experienced depopulation, the Lutheran church has become increasingly important as the center of community life and an important influence in the social and political behavior of the residents.

The Baptist subregion is located primarily in Oklahoma and most of Texas. The development of this denominational concentration contrasts with those of the Catholics and Lutherans because it resulted more from family migrations from other parts of United States and from individual conversions than from the settlement of ethnic communities. Furthermore, the earliest establishment of Baptists in these two states differs because of their unique histories. In Texas, evangelical Christianity commenced when the prohibition against all denominations other than Catholic ended in 1834. Within a few years, Baptist missionaries from other parts of United States held camp meetings and organized congregations. By 1850, 70 Baptist churches (compared to 173 Methodist ones and 47 Presbyterian ones) had been established. Generally these were located in the eastern portion of the state where the agricultural economy mirrored that of the South. As the denomination grew, numerous splits – some caused by views about slavery – and mergers led to a variety of theological and social differences; nevertheless the strength of the Baptist family of churches continued to grow faster than other denominations. By 1906, Baptists were the largest church in the state. Even in counties having a Catholic majority, Baptists now are often the second-ranked denomination in percentage of adherents.

In Oklahoma, some of the first Baptists were members of one or more of five Native American tribes who were deported to Indian Territory, even though for awhile, Creeks persecuted fellow members who

became Christians. The growth of the Baptist churches developed as a result of missionary efforts in the Indian Territory and later expanded when the territory was opened for settlement. The message of Baptist preachers and the structure of their organization appealed to the lives of the settlers on the frontier. Eventually the Baptist family of churches became dominant in Oklahoma, and currently this denomination has more than half of all religious membership in the state. Baptist growth in the Great Plains has nearly doubled in the last four decades, accentuating the homogeneity of this subregion.

The essence of the remaining subregion is its mixture of religions. Seldom do more than half the adherents in each county belong to any one denomination, but Methodists, Catholics, and Lutherans are usually the largest religious populations. In most counties, Presbyterian, Disciples of Christ, and Mennonite churches, as well as numerous other smaller groups, contribute to the diversity of denominations. In addition to this multiplicity within counties, the spatial distribution of counties mapped by denominational strengths does not form contiguous areal groupings.

This subregion can be identified with Methodism because of its ubiquity, with churches in nearly all counties. This extensiveness resulted from its rapid growth during the settlement period. Methodist, as well as Baptist and Presbyterian, preachers spoke to the spiritual needs of struggling families on the frontier. In contrast to the established churches of the East with formal sermonizing, the message of Methodism was compatible with pioneer conditions. Camp meetings and circuit riders were especially effective in contacting a population scattered across a land having a limited infrastructure. Its localized church organization was conducive to the formation of small congregations in this region of sparse population.

Although rural depopulation in the Great Plains has meant a decline in the size of congregations outside of the large cities, Methodist churches are still common in most small towns and hamlets. In many surviving hamlets, the Methodist church is one of the few institutions remaining long after schools, retail shops, and other tertiary services disappear. Generally, Methodism has a larger number of adherents in rural areas than several other denominations. Nevertheless, the community cohesion fostered by a Methodist church in small towns is seldom as strong as those dominated by Lutherans.

### *Non-Christian Groups*

In addition to these four main denominations, as well as numerous other Protestant churches, a variety of non-Christian groups are present in the Great Plains. The dominant religion prior to the nineteenth century



was that of Native Americans. The expression of the religion in stories and rituals varied among the several tribes, with those in the east relating more to agriculture while those in the west connecting with the role of bison. Nevertheless, here they are grouped together for the purpose of generalizations.

Most beliefs and rituals seek cosmic harmony and the renewal of spiritual powers. Associated meaning and values are expressed often by the geometry of constructed features. In addition, central to the Native American religions is a reverence for the natural environment, which includes a belief attributed to special places. Crucial for believers is worship at specific sacred sites.

As Native Americans were dispossessed of their lands, forcefully moved to other areas, and subjected to attempts at cultural conversion, numerous religious changes took place. The attachment to a particular place was severed as many tribes were assigned to reservations elsewhere, and the massacre of Wounded Knee in 1890 convinced many individuals of the futility of continuing their previous ways of living. Many rituals, especially certain dances, were outlawed. Worshiping at sacred sites was prohibited. Conversion to Christianity was encouraged.

Today indigenous religions are practiced by only a small minority of citizens in the Great Plains. Even though the proportional size of the Native American population in this region is larger than in most others in the United States, few residents follow the religion of their ancestors. Many have joined one of the major Christian denominations. Others are members of the Native American Church, which combines elements of their traditional religion with tenets of Christianity. All-night worship sessions, participation in the Sun Dance, and the ritualistic use of peyote attest to the merger of traditional religious beliefs and practices with mainline Christianity.

Although some of the previously hostile restraints have been relaxed in recent decades, contemporary Native Americans still encounter difficulties in practicing their faith. This is most obvious when worshippers make a pilgrimage to a sacred site such as to Bear Butte, Bear's Lodge, or a Sacred Hoop.

Mato Paha (Lakota for "Bear Butte"), located near the Paha Sapa (Black Hills), is the place where many tribes come to pray, especially in May, June, and July. The enduring importance of this particular place is evidenced by artifacts that date to ten thousand years ago. Current worship, however, is sometimes disrupted by the actions of nonworshippers who engage in drag racing, other recreational activities, and similar commercial enterprises.

Mato Tipila (Lakota for "Devil's Tower") is another spectacular Great Plains landmark that engenders conflicting views about the use of space. Lakota worship-

ers, who journey to this site, especially in June, seek solitude for their pipe ceremonies and vision quests. The majority of common tourists voluntarily respect this religious period, but a small group of mountaineers have insisted their members have the right to climb this geologic tower at any time.

The Sacred Hoop ("Medicine Wheel"), located on a mountaintop in the Big Horn Range, is a third illustration of conflicting views about religious practices in the Great Plains. Although many sacred hoops have been constructed across North America and are not always distinctive landscape features, this one is uniquely sited at one of the ten nuclei of continents. It is revered by religious pilgrims as a place having inner spiritual energy and healing. The kind of conflict over the use of place is not as intense here as, for example, at Bear's Lodge/Devil's Tower, but crowds of tourists are not compatible with the ambiance desired for worship.

In contrast with the Native American adherents, who live in both rural tribal lands and urban centers, most other non-Christian groups are almost entirely residents of metropolises. Some Jewish groups first settled originally in rural areas but soon most moved to cities. Today the small Jewish population in the Great Plains is almost entirely urban. Likewise, members of the Baha'i faith are primarily in cities, where larger and more diversified populations offer the setting for alternative religions.

The diversity of religions in the cities increased rapidly after the 1960s because of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 changed the composition of immigrants and because the societal changes in the United States involved the rise of numerous New Age sects.

Most immigrants since the late twentieth century have moved as individuals or single families and have settled in urban areas, where the employment opportunities are the greatest. Immigrants who came as a group, such as the Muslim community in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, which built a mosque before 1930, are the exception. However, refugees from particular countries often form new communities in only a few cities. Although those from Latin America and Eastern Europe expanded membership in Catholic churches in the Great Plains, immigrants from Asia usually brought non-Christian religions. These include, among others, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism, and the various forms of Buddhism. Some migrants, both first- and second-generations, have adhered closely to the traditions of their home areas; but others have adapted their rituals and forms of worship to the social environment of their new homes. Because some religious communities are small and unable to build and maintain temples, pilgrimages and festivals are important, especially for members of South Asian religions.

The other main sources of non-Christian religions arose from the rapid conversion to an established faith (especially Islam), from the revival of early religions (for example, Paganism), and from the development and adoption of new spiritual groups. Illustrative of the latter are Transcendental Meditation, Unification Church of Reverend Moon, International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and various modifications to traditional Buddhism and Hinduism. Adherents tend to be persons seeking a fundamental change in American values and behavior. Acceptance is highest among individuals in cities. Those supporters who live in more remote areas may interact with other believers electronically.

### Conclusion

As is true for all of America, considerable diversity in religion exists in the Great Plains. In several respects, however, the expression of religion is distinctive in this region. As shown by Map 1, adherence to religion, as measured through membership and participation in various denominations, contrasts with other parts of America. This distinctiveness is related to the low density of the rural population, which reflects the climatic conditions and geographic location within the United States. This relationship demonstrates clearly the interactive effects between environment and religion.

See also: *Appalachian Mountain Religion*; *Atlantic World*; *Baptists: Denominations*; *California and the Pacific Rim Region*; *Frontier and Borderlands*; *Geographical Approaches*; *Lutheran Churches*; *Methodists entries*; *Mountain West and Prairie Region*; *Native American Religion entries*; *New England Region*; *Pacific Northwest Region*; *Roman Catholicism entries*; *South as Region*; *Southwest as Region*.

Robert Stoddard  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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