

The Ozarks: Buckle of the Bible Belt or Haven for Religious Diversity?

by David Embree

It has been said that none other than H. L. Mencken dubbed Springfield, Missouri, the “buckle of the Bible belt” (though a review of his writings does not support that claim) and it is often commonly assumed by non-residents that the Ozarks epitomizes simplistic, provincial Protestant Christian dominance under which other belief systems are not only derided, but persecuted. “Outsiders” to the region often see all the little churches and engage in a few conversations about religion with locals and conclude that Ozarkers are uniformly church-going and dogmatic about their own religious predilections. There are indeed many “fundamentalist” Christian colleges throughout the Ozarks, as well as the headquarters for the Assemblies of God, Baptist Bible Fellowship and the Pentecostal Church of God, along with printing houses for a variety of conservative Christian publications. It is true that religious atlases color the Ozarks “Baptist,” with a few counties of “Christian Church/Church of Christ” dominance for some slight contrast. The largest church edifices in the region tend not to be Roman Catholic cathedrals nor mainline Protestant holy places (and certainly not synagogues or mosques), but rather meeting places of conservative Protestant denominations which tend to stress congregational autonomy, personal adult choice of religious commitment (as opposed to a family ceremony shortly after birth), and freedom of opinion on a variety of issues.

Perhaps it is this lack of hardcore creedal conformity in the dominant religious groups of the Ozarks which have enabled the region to serve as a place where those outside the religious mainstream can find a home. Certainly there is a great deal of rhetoric expended about proselytizing others into one’s own position and wailing about perceived evils manifesting themselves within the Ozarks, and yet, broad-based community reform efforts on the basis of religious doctrine seldom go anywhere, and generally the wide diversity of belief systems present in the Ozarks co-exist with little conflict.

The Ozarks has long been a “frontier region” for religion. In places where the living can be difficult and everyone is on their way from somewhere to somewhere else, religious disputes are distracting and counterproductive. This is not to say that Ozarkers at various times have not disagreed with and critiqued their neighbors’ faiths,

but concerted efforts to oppose other viewpoints and the people who hold them have generally been localized and anemic, especially compared to some of the tensions created by race or even political persuasion.

How religiously diverse is the Ozarks? The region is far more diverse than even many residents might think. What all can be contained within the designation *religion*? Definitions of the term are many. Some definitions take an organizational viewpoint, identifying religion as a particular type of social grouping. Other definitions focus on the “all-consuming passion” of someone’s life. Yet other definitions are preoccupied with systems of rituals and rules. All of these types of definitions have merit to them, but for the purposes of this article, we will focus on *religion* in terms of *worldview*—that which an individual or group of individuals perceives to be the truth about the realities of human existence. “What is really real?” “Who am I?” “Where did I come from?” “Where am I going?” and “How should we then live?” are some of the significant questions relating to this issue of worldview. Humanity owns numerous broad worldview categories, each of which contains uncounted distinct belief systems, and many of these expressions can be found in the Ozarks.

Christian Variations

It is accurate to assume that the dominant worldview within the Ozarks is Christianity. The basic beliefs of a creator deity who cares for humans and who offers them a way to escape the penalties of the mistakes they have made in their lives for a better existence on earth and a happy afterlife through the efforts of a divine savior are fairly well known. Christianity as a worldview states that both the material and spiritual realms are real and that certain ideas have been established as true by God himself.

Outside the shared basics of the Christian faith (Jesus as a divine teacher and hope for some kind of joyous eternal destiny), groups differ over the correct interpretation of Bible doctrines, appropriate behavior, and varying expectations regarding apocalyptic events. Within the borders of the Ozarks, there are nearly

David Embree has been the director of Christian Campus House at Southwest Missouri State University since 1978, and an instructor in SMSU’s Religious Studies Department since 1983. Embree researches, writes, and teaches in the field of New American Religions.

...for the purposes of this article, we will focus on religion in terms of worldview—that which an individual or group of individuals perceives to be the truth about the realities of human existence.