Notes on the Geography
of Religious Town Names in the U.S.

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T
HE DECISION-PROCESS involved in rendering a name to a
phenomenon, whether it be a physical feature like a plant, lake, or
mountain, or whether man-made constructs like surnames, buildings,
or towns, has fascinated students in many disciplines. This process
is of particular interest when the names given have religious,
mystical, or philosophical connotations. Although the reason why a
town was named Damascus, Sodom, Hope, Faith, or St. Joseph may
be unique for each case, a study of the spatial arrangement of
religious town names can often aid in furthering the understanding
of population migrations of certain groups, their settlement patterns,
and their impact on the social history of an area.

Numerous studies in various disciplines have been concerned
with names or words in an areal context.[1] Geographers have made
noteworthy contributions along these lines.[2] There has, neverthe-

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[1] For example, E. Wallace McMullen, "The Term *Prairie* in the United States,"
Names, 5 (1957), 27–46; Clarence W. Minkel, "Names in the Mapping of Original
Vegetation," *Names*, 5 (1957), 157–61; Harold B. Allen, "Distribution Patterns of
Place Name Pronunciations," *Names*, 6 (1958), 74–79; George B. Pace, "Linguistic
Geography and Names Ending in 'i'," *American Speech*, 35 (1960) 175–87; Stanley
L. Robe, "Caribbean Words in Mexican Toponymy," *Names*, 8 (1960), 6–14; and
Gordon R. Wood, "Dialect Contours in the Southern States," *American Speech*, 38
(1963), 143–56.

[2] Some recent works include: H. F. Raup and William B. Pounds, Jr., "North-
ernmost Spanish Frontier in California as Shown by the Distribution of Place
Names," *California Historical Society Quarterly*, 32 (1953), 43–48; Robert C. West,
"The Term 'Bayou' in the United States: A Study in the Geography of Place
Names," *Annals*, Association of American Geographers, 44 (1954), 63–74; David
E. Sopher, "Arabic Place Names in Spain," *Names*, 3 (1955), 5–13; Wilbur Ze-
linsky, "Some Problems in the Distribution of Generic Terms in the Place-Names of
the Northeastern United States," *Annals*, Association of American Geographers, 45
(1955), 319–49; Meredith F. Burrill, "Toponymic Generics," *Names*, 4 (1956),
129–37 and 226–40; H. F. Raup, "The Names of Ohio's Streams," *Names*, 5 (1957),

less, been little research in toponymics concerned with analysis of religious place names in a spatial context.[3] Therefore, since the role of different cultural groups in uniquely modifying the landscape has long constitued a broad research problem for the cultural geographer, this study in linguistic geography focuses on one landscape feature: that of religious town names.[4] Its purpose is to examine the areal pattern of religious town names in the coterminous United States. Several queries follow: what is the areal pattern (if there is one), what are its characteristics, and what reasons can account for its arrangement ?

The religious town names mapped were for those towns listed in the state volumes of the U. S. Census of Population for 1960 and the Rand McNally Road Atlas.[5] The process of selecting the appropriate town names involved the checking of names in each state and the consultation of standard Biblical references listing names that appear in Judeo-Christian literature.[6]

162–68; Thomas Field, "The Indian Place Names of Kentucky," *Names*, 7 (1959), 154–66; Erhard Rostlund, "The Geographic Range of the Historic Bison in the Southeast," *Annals*, Association of American Geographers, 50 (1960), 394–407; and D. W. Meinig, "The Mormon Culture Region: Strategies and Patterns in the Geography of the American West, 1847–1964," *Annals*, Association of American Geographers, 55 (1965), 191–220.

[3] A few studies include: Mark F. Boyd, "Mission Sites in Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, 17 (1939), 255–80; Henry Raup Wagner, "Saints' Names in California," *Historical Society of Southern California*, 29 (1947), 49–58; Angelice Chavez, "Saints' Names in New Mexico Geography," *El Palacio*, 56 (1949), 323–35, and "New Mexico Religious Place Names Other Than Those of Saints," *El Palacio*, 57 (1950), 23–26; Walther E. Weidhaus, "German Religious Influence in American Place Names," *American German Review*, 23 (1957), 32–34; Boyd H. Granter, "Early Mormon Place Names in Arizona," *Western Folklore*, 16 (1957), 43–47; Thomas M. Pearce, "Religious Place Names in New Mexico," *Names*, 9 (1961), 1–7, and J. N. Bowman, "The Names of California Missions," *The Americas*, 21 (1965), 363–74.

[4] In this study religious town names connote names found in Judeo-Christian literature and not those connected with animistic beliefs, religious objects or events, religious buildings, or satanic personalities.

[5] U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of the United States: 1960, Population*, Vol. I, Number of Inhabitants and the *Rand McNally Road Atlas of the U.S.*, Chicago, Rand McNally and Company, Fortieth Edition, 1965.

[6] M. C. Hazard, *A Complete Concordance to the American Standard Version of the Holy Bible*, New York, Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1922; William Smith, *A Dictionary of the Bible*, New York, Fleming H. Revell Co., n.d.; and Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, Chicago, Moody Press, 1957.

The census and atlas do not list all the small ubiquitous, unincorporated settlements, many of which carry religious names. However, this study is primarily concerned with the major areal patterns that are evident.

The town names mapped were of three types: (1) a place name mentioned in the Bible, (2) an individual's name mentioned in the same, and (3) those place names having prefixes of St., Ste., San or Santa (connoting Roman Catholic saints). Names are excluded for religious events and places such as Concepcion, Los Angeles, Paradise, and Providence. Inasmuch as there was no regional pattern for place versus individual's names, they were grouped into one pattern on the map (see Figure 1). Names which satisfied the
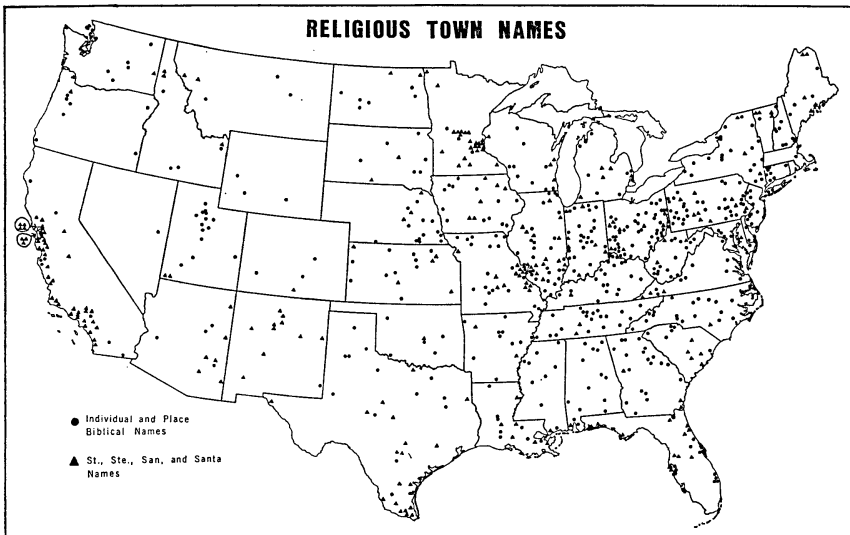

Figure 1

above stipulations and those which had prefixes or suffixes added to the religious town names were included. For example, names such as Esther, Jordan, and Palestine were included, as were likewise such variations as Estherville, East Jordan, and New Palestine. Included also were several classical names found in the Bible, such as Syracuse and Sparta, although their religious significance may not be direct. Several very common individual's names in the English language which also appear in the literature were omitted because

of their close association with English history and their widespread usage in the vernacular. Such names (and variations) were Adam, Elizabeth, John, James and Thomas.[7]

The three most commonly occurring Biblical names were Salem, Lebanon, and Athens. There appeared to be no concentration of these names. Other frequently occurring names include Bethel and Bethlehem, Eden, Sparta, Sharon, Goshen, Hebron, Syracuse, Beulah, Jordan, Rome and Canaan. Sometimes the frequency of a particular town name is increased by directional prefixes, e.g. East Syracuse. This accounts for a certain amount of clustering in the patterns. The most common Biblical individuals' names were Alexandria, Mary, Peter, Philip, David, and variations of them. As for the saint names, the most frequent were St. Mary, St. Paul, St. Joseph, St. John, St. Louis, St. James, St. George, and St. Peter.

States with the most religious town names were mainly in the central and eastern Middle West, except for California and Texas, which contained numerous saint names (see Table 1). Some of the border states also contained a number of these names (see Table 1).

Table I. Leading States with Religious Town Names

California	66	Texas	32
Ohio	54	Indiana	30
Pennsylvania	46	New York	28
Illinois	42	Minnesota	27
Missouri	38		

Two broad patterns stand out on the U. S. map of religious town names: the east central and the south-southwestern belts. The first pattern is a relatively dense concentration running from the Middle Colonies (eastern Pennsylvania and adjacent New Jersey) westward into the Middle West. As James stated, the people of the Middle Colonies "were the restless pioneers who provided the main impetus for the westward movement, and who set their stamp on the greater part of rural America."[8] The pattern gradually thins out to the north in Michigan and Wisconsin as well

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[7] A complete listing of the town names included in this study may be obtained from the authors.

[8] Preston James, *A Geography of Man*, New York, Ginn and Co., 1959, p. 265.

as to the west in Iowa and the Great Plains states. Moving south-
ward from the border states into the Deep South the decline is
more gradual.

Within this broad east central belt one may note the prominence
of local concentrations of religious names. One of the most striking
is the elongated pattern which acts indeed as the backbone of the
east central belt: the Ohio River Valley and some of its major
tributaries. This early settlement route shows groupings of religious
names in the Pittsburgh-Wheeling area, the Cincinnati region, and
the southern Illinois area known as Little Egypt. The Wabash
Valley, an early settled part of Illinois and Indiana, has several
religious names along its banks. Perhaps even more noticeable is
the concentration in the Miami Valley of western Ohio. The Nash-
ville Basin in Tennessee, settled even before the middle and lower
Ohio Valley, similarly shows a heavy concentration. However, the
Bluegrass Region of Kentucky, settled like the Nashville Basin
prior to 1790, has relatively few religious names. The Grand Prairie
of central Illinois, not fully settled until 1840, making it one of the
last settled portions of the east central region, has a sparse pattern.
Thus the distribution of religious town names is partly associated
with some of the early migration routes and centers of early per-
manent settlement in this east central region.

The second broad belt runs along the south-southwestern fringe
of the U. S., extending from Florida to California and reflecting the
Spanish and, to a lesser extent, French influence. The major
characteristic of this belt is the dominance of towns named after
Roman Catholic clerics and saints and the sparcity of other religious
town names. The areal pattern of this belt is generally less dense
and somewhat less continuous than that of the east central belt
(except for coastal California). Again areas of concentration within
this southern belt are discernible, with coastal California clearly
having the greatest density and containing approximately half the
towns in this belt that are named after saints. Although not shown
on the map, there are nine counties in French-settled southern
Louisiana with saint names to reinforce the pattern. In Florida and
Louisiana the saints' names begin with *St.* or *Ste.*, whereas in
Texas, New Mexico, and California *San* or *Santa* is the usual prefix.

Other generalizations may be noted from the map. Despite com-
mon preconceptions about the Southern Bible Belt, the number of

religious town names is smaller than anticipated. New England also has fewer religious town names than one might anticipate from this area's role in the religious history of the United States. A westward extension from the New England area is visible along the Hudson River-Mohawk Gap in New York, marking a route used by early New England settlers moving westward. Along the middle and upper portions of the Mississippi River, the heavy St. Louis and St. Paul concentrations of saints' names stand out. Although other saint names are found throughout the east central belt, these are clearly the two major areas. The South, in contrast, save along the coasts, has relatively few towns named after saints in comparison with its other religious town names. This area is also largely devoid of Catholic churches.[9] In the western states an interesting grouping of town names occurs in central Utah: the towns represent the influence of early Mormon settlements in the Wasatch Oasis and along the Sevier River. The general sparsity of religious town names in most of the West (as well as the greater density of the East) is of course partially a function of the density of towns.

The two broad regions of religious town names in the U. S., the east central and the south-southwestern, thus correspond to the early settled areas and transportation routes. These two areas were influenced by different cultural groups. These religious town names co-vary with other cultural features of the landscape, such as church morphology, house types, and settlement planning and patterns. While cultural groups like the Germans, English, Irish, Spanish, and French have made a major imprint in the two broad belts, certain cultural centers that were settled early, such as Yankee New England and the Deep South, show less tendency toward religious influence on the naming of towns.

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[9] For a geographic discussion on the religious geography of the U.S. containing maps of the memberships of denominations see Wilbur Zelinsky, "An Approach to the Religious Geography of the United States," *Annals*, Association of American Geographers, 51 (1961), 139–93.