

My project is entitled, “Metaphysical Belief in South-Central Kentucky.” It is about the philosophies, beliefs, and religions of four participants who live in this area, with an emphasis on nonreligious, “non-traditional” metaphysical beliefs, such as astrology, stone healing, shamanism, and palm reading (to name a few). The goal of the project was to provide a brief look at the state of metaphysical belief among individuals and in the larger cultural sphere of south-central Kentucky. I also focused on how these beliefs are put into practice, the future of metaphysical belief in this area, and some relevant religious ideals.

The Purpose

Four people is obviously way too small of a sample size to say anything conclusive about the philosophical landscape of the entire region, and I don’t attempt to do so. What they say may imply larger trends, but as far as I am concerned, these consistencies are coincidences that, at this point, can’t be substantiated or applied on a larger scale. Neither do I attempt to use these interviews to promote a certain set of beliefs or to use them as an arguing point for anything. The goal was not to make generalizations or to place value judgments on my informant’s beliefs. This project is meant simply as a brief, anecdotal snapshot into the metaphysical beliefs of four opinionated people in this region, at this time. In short, the content of my interviews should be taken at face value – I am offering nothing more than a glimpse into a few personal, idiosyncratic belief systems, simply because I think it’s an interesting topic.

I use the term “metaphysical” to refer generally to anything beyond the physical, natural, observable world. These things are unseen, unproven, subjective, and can mean very different things to different people (as we will see). This can include belief in a religion or ghosts, among other things, but my main focus is more about “New Age”-type beliefs like astrology and stone healing. I chose not to use

the words “supernatural” and certainly not “superstitious” because of the negative and unwanted connotations they hold; “supernatural” also implies for some that I’m just talking about ghosts, which is not the focus of my project. “Metaphysical” is a lesser-used term which is not as value-laden but still accurately labels what I’m trying to describe.

My informants vary greatly in age, gender, occupation, religion, and just about everything else, but the unifying factors are that they all live in this general area and they all have some strong opinion about what they consider to be “metaphysical.” I interviewed two believers and two nonbelievers, as well as two men and two women. The length of their interviews range from about twelve to sixty minutes and cover a wide range of topics, which I will do my best to sum up succinctly and in relation to some of the core questions I asked each informant. All four of my informants have graciously allowed me to use their real names in this paper and to record their interviews.

The Interviews

My first informant is Cheri Petro, a middle-aged woman who is a strong believer in the metaphysical. She is an artist who teaches classes about shamanism and tarot card reading, and offers stone oracle readings at a local botanica called Green Earth Stones. She has been an apprentice to a shaman and follows the Red Road (a Native American spiritual teaching). She is extremely knowledgeable and open about all things metaphysical.

One of Cheri’s most emphasized values that she speaks about several times during our interview is the interconnectedness of everything in the world and among religions. “...It’s life force. It’s called a different thing, but it’s the same everywhere. So when I look at it in that perspective and I look at it across all these different cultures and belief systems...*we’re the same.*” This belief in the connectedness of life and the world seems to be very central to her belief system. She believes in shamanism,

alternative medicine, crystal healing, and sound healing (among other things), which each entail many beliefs within them. She also implies belief in a creator.

A frequently used term during our interview was “energy,” which Cheri used very consistently. She did not specifically define this term in this context, but she implied that “energy” was what made things what they are, and is an extremely important force in the universe.

Regarding religion: “Because it’s not a belief system per se – it’s energy work, it’s holistic – it can be incorporated into any system.” Cheri told me that she believed that any of the beliefs and practices we discussed could be compatible with any religion, and often were. I did not directly ask, “What is your religion?” or, “Do you have a religion?” But Cheri expressed several spiritual beliefs and a lot of skepticism about the major religions of today – mainly that they’re “not about love,” and are often judgmental and too exclusive.

About Christianity, a belief that is very often described as judgmental and “my-way-or-the-highway” type, she says that this exclusivity doesn’t match up with her views. After mentioning that 30% of the world is Christian, she says, “I can’t imagine a world in which 70% of creation is lost.” But, at the same time, she knows a very religious Christian who was very supportive and accepting of her beliefs as well – “A nice surprise,” she said.

Regarding family: Cheri says that she has the “whole range” of reactions from family members in regards to her metaphysical belief. She has a sister who does not understand and is very judgmental about Cheri’s decision to leave her previous steady finance job to pursue art and engage in metaphysical teachings. She has other family members who are just curious about what she believes, and others who are curious but won’t confront her about it. She didn’t show much remorse for those family members who were unsupportive of her – regarding her sister, she says, “Well, I can’t change her mind. But, it’s not my job to either,” and finally, simply, “That’s the way it is.”

Regarding intolerance: Cheri says that she has not had very many negative reactions to her strong beliefs, despite her sister and some neighbors who ask her if she's a witch. She says that she sees much more discrimination because of her education and because she's a woman than she does because of any spiritual aspect of her belief system.

But, she does tell a notable story about a woman she knows who had similar metaphysical beliefs but was terrified to make them public because she was afraid of intolerance. This woman said she was afraid her children would be physically harmed and she might be fired if people knew that she held certain beliefs. Cheri believes other people are in this situation as well – they hold beliefs, but are afraid of negative reactions against it so they don't go to her classes or make their beliefs public.

Cheri did not believe a rumor I mentioned about death threats that were supposedly made against the Green Earth Stones store – she said that rumor was “blown out of proportion.”

Regarding the future of metaphysical belief in the area: Cheri believes that metaphysical belief is growing in this area, and seems very optimistic about Bowling Green in particular. She said that it is a good sign that a store like Green Earth Stones can even be open, and that the growing commonplaceness of alternative medicinal practitioners like chiropractors and herbalists (who were thought to be crazy years ago) are now becoming more accepted.

My next interview is with Travis Taylor, a 28-year-old male who identifies as a nonbeliever of the metaphysical world. Travis is not staunchly opposed to metaphysical belief, and one of his core beliefs is that, “I'm more of an inclusive person who tries to accept everyone for who they are rather than their personal beliefs.” He says he is not bothered by people who hold these beliefs, “as long as they're good people.”

His tolerance for those with other beliefs is high because he does not believe in saying that his own beliefs are the “right” ones: “Nobody can say what is true and isn’t true. I think it would be ignorant and arrogant to say that anybody’s wrong...everybody has the right to believe.”

Regarding religion: Travis does not have any religious beliefs, which relates directly to his stance on other metaphysical beliefs as well – he does not believe in anything that isn’t observable and can’t be proven by science. For Travis, it seems to be a simple concept: he doesn’t believe in anything unproven by science, and that’s pretty much the end of it.

Regarding family: Travis says that his family has completely different views than him, regarding the metaphysical world and religion. His family is comprised of southern Baptists, who “also believe in ghosts and spirits and demons...”

Regarding intolerance: Travis makes some ties between those who hold religious metaphysical beliefs and their level of intolerance. He says that his family of southern Baptists discriminate against his nonbelief, and against those who do not hold their particular traditional values.

He mentions an acquaintance who “identifies as a witch.” He says that she is very private about her beliefs, because “Obviously, being in south-central Kentucky...she tries not to let anybody know.” He said that she does this to avoid discrimination. When I asked him if discrimination on philosophical or religious basis was a problem here, he said it was a big problem, saying this area was very close-minded and closed to new ideas.

Regarding the future of metaphysical belief in the area: When asked about the future of metaphysical beliefs, he says that belief will first grow and then decline. He says that we are becoming increasingly more tolerant of “nontraditional” beliefs, which will increase the amount of people with metaphysical beliefs: “With people being more open about their beliefs, it will allow more people to become a part of different congregations.”

But, ultimately, he says that these beliefs “slowly dissipate, and they slowly go away after so long,” because, “as time goes by, ideas and thoughts and science changes. What people believe change.” When I asked him if he thinks these beliefs *should* go away, he said “not specifically,” because they are part of “the human condition, the human story.” He believes that the major religions of today will be around 500-600 years from now, but won’t be as prominent.

My next interview is with Raena Hubbell, an 18-year-old female who is a believer of the metaphysical, in various different and unique aspects. She identifies as a Norse Pagan who believes in astrology, and practices tarot card readings and palm readings, though she considers these practices to play out mostly in her down time and they don’t heavily influence her thinking in everyday life.

Her religious and metaphysical beliefs are typically practiced by herself and she has very little group affiliation based on her beliefs, saying that it’s “hard to find people” and a lot of sects just don’t “resonate” with her. She sites only tumblr and some friends who are also into astrology.

“A lot of my personal belief is that everything has an energy, and that seems to be a unifying belief across any kind of witchcraft or divination practice...we all believe that everything has an energy, and these practices tap into this energy, and can to some extent, either kind of draw something from it or slant it in a certain direction.”

Regarding religion: Raena is a Norse Pagan whose patron god is Odin. She says that there is no inherent relation between Norse Paganism and her more New-Age metaphysical beliefs, saying that those are more “universal, independent, fun things.” She said that they could be tied to a lot of religions, but they may not always be compatible with every religion.

She mentions divination and magical practices mentioned in Norse mythology, but they take on a different nature than the kinds of practices she engages in today.

Regarding family: Raena's family has very different religious and metaphysical beliefs than her. She says her whole family is Catholic, while her mother somewhat identifies as Wiccan and her father is Buddhist, both after trying out several other religions first. She found out about Norse Paganism and her New Age beliefs mostly from books she read at varying times in her life.

She said about her mother, "even when she really strongly identified as Christian, she was okay with it."

Regarding intolerance: When I asked her if she had ever suffered from discrimination because of her beliefs, she said, "Not since high school," when she was pushed down the stairs. Aside from this incidence, she doesn't mention any other ways she was discriminated against at all, nor among any of her friends.

However, she is cautious when telling her beliefs to others, wanting to "get a feel for how intense they are with their own beliefs" first because there is the potential for judgmental attitudes.

Regarding the future of metaphysical belief in the area: When asked if any of her particular metaphysical beliefs were growing or declining in the area, she says that it was basically staying the same, but declining, if anything. "More than anything, I know more people who have really recently converted to atheism."

My final interview was with Jay Wilkerson, a 57-year-old man who identifies strongly as an atheist objectivist and a staunch nonbeliever of anything that isn't a part of objective, observable reality.

“I think the human mind wants to see meaning and patterns where there are none,” he says of metaphysical belief. “People need to reign in their emotional-driven beliefs and look at what really is.”

Regarding religion: Jay is an atheist who does not subscribe to absolutely any kind of religious belief, despite being in an area in which he says that so many people around him are religious. “Most people, I think, would interpret my belief system as cold and cruel and uncaring and open to kill or steal or lie because I have no god, but that’s not the case at all. I don’t need a supernatural being to convince me it’s wrong to lie or steal or kill; it’s evident.”

Jay regards religious belief and metaphysical belief to often be in the same vein, though he does say that there are many other atheists have other metaphysical beliefs, and that people can “hold discongruous beliefs simultaneously,” and “reconcile the difference.”

Regarding family: Jay describes his entire family being “full of metaphysical beliefs.” Aside from those tied with religion, he gives an example of “signs” – “They might see a license plate number that coincidentally is somebody’s birthday, and take that as a sign that that number would be good to play in the lottery. I personally think it’s all just coincidence.”

Regarding intolerance: “If you believe in crystals, there’s no stigma against that.” He says that people enjoy making their metaphysical beliefs public, while those who lack metaphysical belief are discriminated against much more than those who hold beliefs, “who have to stay in the closet and keep their mouth shut.” He thinks that anti-atheist discrimination is much stronger than New-Age metaphysical belief discrimination.

Regarding the future of metaphysical belief in this area: Jay describes the future of metaphysical belief in south-central Kentucky as being on a “very, very slow decline,” though he admits to being surprised that, “the more technology we seem to have gotten, the more these supernatural beliefs seem to have propagated.”

But yet, he sees a slow decline in the future regardless of this observance. The decline in belief can be attributed to the “effectiveness of objective, logical, scientific thought,” but the change will be so slow because, “People like to cling to things that explain the unknown that make them feel comfortable, and safe and secure.” In short, “it’s just ineffective, and ineffective things will die out eventually.”

He thinks this decline is a good thing, stating, “I think the belief in these strange, supernatural things hold us back from advancement.”

Analysis

It’s obvious from looking at the content of each interview that there are some interesting common threads mentioned by two or more people – for instance, the emphasis on “energy” as explained by Cheri and Raena, and the belief in that which is “scientifically proven” by Travis and Jay. Also, interestingly, the believers were both women and the nonbelievers both men. There are notable differences as well, one of the more prominent ones being Jay’s statements about being discriminated against because of nonbelief by believers, when everyone else mostly relates stories about the opposite: believers being discriminated against by nonbelievers.

One thing every informant mentioned at some point in the interview was the predominantly southern Baptist atmosphere, and none of them seemed to think this Christian prevalence was a good thing. They all cited some kind of judgment or discrimination brought upon them by Christians, or that could potentially be brought upon them.

According to pluralism.org, Bowling Green has become much more religiously plural in recent years, with growing numbers of “religious nones,” meaning people who do not identify with any major religion, with increased immigration into the area cited as a major cause. Right now, only a little more than half the population describes themselves as religious. This is very interesting information, because this is not something any of my informants directly addressed. Cheri said that metaphysical belief was

growing, and Travis said that people were becoming more tolerant, and this fact really ties these responses together and provides a possible reason why it may seem to them as if the current metaphysical landscape is becoming more accepted. The website states that the Bible Belt is being transformed – “Today, Bowling Green is uniquely emerging as a small but growing hub of religious diversity in a region historically known for its plethora of Christian churches.” My informants seem to be both cognizant of this change, but also aware of the strong Christian history this region has and their experiences with the effects of this history.

This same trend is taking hold across the country as well – “nones” are becoming much more popular, and have doubled in percentage in the 1990s, mostly generally because a growing number of people are dissatisfied with major religions and choose not to affiliate with them. This, combined with increased immigration into this area, may reasonably account for why it appears as if New Age-type metaphysical belief may be on the rise here: a decreasing in traditional Baptist belief may be playing a large part. Though, again, it is still very difficult and/or inaccurate to attempt to draw any definite conclusions from my interviews alone.

Bibliography

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