



## Shaping the Public Square: Protestants and Catholics in the History of the Pacific Northwest

DALE E. SODEN

As Lewis and Clark's Corps of Discovery paddled furiously down the once wild Columbia River in the fall of 1804 on the final leg of its remarkable journey to the Pacific, Native Americans must have looked on with awe and wonder. Few, if any, could possibly have imagined the destruction of their own culture that would shortly follow. And certainly no one could have predicted that by the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Pacific Northwest would provide a number of America's most famous cultural icons and symbols. From Nike, Starbucks, and Boeing to the Seattle Mariners and Microsoft, the region's entrepreneurs have placed their stamp on what people all over the world recognize as an American way of life. Many commentators have described the underlying ethos of the region to be dominated by its apparent freedom from history and its inclinations toward individualism, creativity, and innovation. Seattle, Vancouver, and Portland all are cities that boast international elements. And while the cost to native populations as well as to the environment has often been devastating since Lewis and Clark arrived two hundred years ago, few can doubt the remarkable story of transformation that has taken place.

*Mainline Protestant and Catholic churches have been influential in shaping the history of the Pacific Northwest. But times and cultures change. Will these churches meet the challenge? Or will they simply fade away?*

## RELIGIOUS INFLUENCE IN THE NORTHWEST

While Lewis and Clark did not come to the region for the purpose of imposing religion, nevertheless the expedition set in motion forces that would eventually lead to the transplantation of Christianity to the land beyond the Rockies. For those of us who have lived most of our lives in the region and who identify with the Christian faith, the questions regarding the influence of the region on religion and vice versa are important but frequently unexamined. In fact, most narratives are generally devoid of any mention of religious influence after Marcus Whitman, Jason Lee, and a number of other missionaries from the 1830s and 1840s. From the middle of the nineteenth century to the present, most histories of the Pacific Northwest either assume that religion played little or no significant role in the life of the region, or, if pressed for evidence, historians retreat to the fact that Washington and Oregon are the least-churched states in the country.

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Yet more recent scholarship is helping reveal a more complicated story. Far from being an irrelevant factor when considering the ethos of the region, religious impulses and institutions have indeed been woven into the fabric of the Pacific Northwest. To be sure, no singular expression has emerged to dominate the religious culture of the region, as is the case in the upper Midwest or the South. And in recent surveys, over twenty percent of the respondents in Washington and Oregon acknowledge that they do not identify with a specific religion, although many consider themselves to be spiritual. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to find substantive expressions of religion throughout the history of the region to the present. While much more research remains to be done, a case can be made that, compared with other regions of the country, religion in the Pacific Northwest is more creative and inventive; religion is often more ecumenical in character, and it is more influential on the region than generally thought. It is not unreasonable to think that the peculiar dynamics of religion and culture in the Pacific Northwest provide a window into the future for the rest of the country. As the rest of the country finds its populace farther removed from the ethnic identities that shaped religious culture a hundred years ago, the sociological conditions may look similar to patterns that have emerged in the Pacific Northwest.

A discussion of religion in the Pacific Northwest is often marked by elements of paradox, if not contradiction. As mentioned above, Washington and Oregon have always been statistically the least-churched states in the nation; specifically, this means that, per capita, fewer individuals attend church on a regular basis or belong to a church. And yet from 1910 to 1940, the largest Presbyterian church in

the country existed in Seattle. On the one hand, while no one denomination or religious expression has emerged to dominate the culture, nevertheless religious impulses have been clearly responsible for many critical decisions regarding public policy. While the region is noted for its anti-institutional character and the ways in which the natural beauty of the region and the recreational opportunities attract the population to find God in nature, the Pacific Northwest nevertheless has produced a number of strong ecumenical organizations and educational and social service institutions.

To capture some of the elements of religion in the Pacific Northwest, I will focus primarily on mainline Protestant and Catholic examples, sharing briefly the stories of several individuals who reflect the dynamics of the region over the last 175 years. In America, these Protestant denominations include Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist, American (Northern) Baptist, Congregationalist (United Church of Christ), Christian (Disciples of Christ), Unitarian, Reformed Church in America, and African American Baptist churches, as well as African Methodist Episcopal churches. It is important to acknowledge other religious expressions in the region, ranging from Jewish and Mormon to a bevy of spiritualist movements as well as Native American and Asian groups. But I emphasize Protestants and Catholics primarily because historically they have exerted the greatest influence on the public square.

#### FOUR HISTORICAL PERIODS

There are four distinct periods of history since the arrival of missionaries in Oregon in the 1830s. The first period lasted from the 1830s to the 1880s and reflected the efforts of American society to assimilate or isolate Native Americans in order to promote the triumph of Christian culture and Western civilization. Catholic and Protestant missionaries played key roles in this complicated and often tragic cultural conflict.

The second era ran roughly from the 1880s through the 1920s and was marked by a concerted effort on the part of Protestants and Catholics to transform a frontier and emerging urban culture. This culture, focused on alcohol consumption, gambling, and prostitution, catered to young men and women through inexpensive recreational activities ranging from unregulated theater and movies to dance halls, racetracks, and amusement parks. Religious reformers fought the advance of this culture and tried to mitigate its effects on women and children. Protestants in particular attempted to align themselves with an emerging middle class and shape its political, economic, and social values.

The third era existed from the 1930s through the end of the 1960s. The onset of the Great Depression and advent of the Second World War and Cold War created an unusual period of cultural agreement in American society. Protestants and Catholics participated in a larger social effort to create a consensus around political, social, and religious values. In many cases, religious leaders cooperated on be-

half of a number of social issues and projects. And largely in ecumenical efforts, Protestants and Catholics periodically challenged racial discrimination during this period.

The present era began in the latter part of the 1960s. The convergence of the Vietnam War, counterculture, and more militant civil rights activity broke down the previous era's social consensus. Cultural conflict over the nature of American society and the role of the United States in the world produced a bitter division between liberal and conservative social philosophies that translated into religious expressions divided along similar lines. Leadership within mainline Christianity moved toward more liberal social and political positions. For the past thirty years, Catholics and Protestants in the Pacific Northwest have collaborated on many social and political issues out of a common theological commitment to political and economic justice, environmental stewardship, and world peace. Specifically, they have focused energies and resources on behalf of race relations, poverty, hunger, and homelessness, as well as the environment. Several issues related to war and peace as well as U.S. foreign policy have motivated thousands of mainline Christians in the region to periodically challenge the policies of the American government. Other issues, however, have been more bitterly contested, such as abortion, the death penalty, gay and lesbian rights, and euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide. Not only are mainline Christians likely to be divided on these issues, public debate is also complicated by the active involvement of more conservative Christian groups. Congregational and parish-level analysis presents an even more complicated picture because of the number and diversity of those churches. While there are exceptions, parishioners tend to express more conservative social values than church leaders at the national level. In addition, in Oregon and Washington, the eastern sides are generally more conservative than the western sides of the states.

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If the contemporary era is marked by a vigorous debate between liberal and conservative social philosophies, there remains, nevertheless, a surprising amount of activity in and influence on the public square by mainline religious groups. Mainline religious groups may be losing “market share,” but their commitment to shaping the public square in virtually every important public debate is still strong. That commitment will likely continue well into the twenty-first century. The question remains, however: Will the historic mainline religious expressions continue to exercise the greatest influence on the public square in the Pacific Northwest, or will more evangelical or entrepreneurial varieties of religious expression push mainline churches to the sideline?

## REPRESENTATIVE CHARACTERS

At the risk of great oversimplification, let me use an individual from each of the first three eras to illuminate salient characteristics of the period and of religion in the Pacific Northwest. I will conclude with brief references to several individuals and organizations that reflect the more robust character of religious influence in the contemporary era.

In the first period, between 1830 and 1880, James Wilbur stands out as an excellent example of the prominent place of religion in the region's early cultural conflicts. Wilbur was an imposing figure of nearly three hundred pounds, standing over six feet tall. He was pragmatic and entrepreneurial. After traveling from New York to Portland, Oregon, around the Cape of Good Hope, Wilbur and his wife began their long career in the Pacific Northwest in 1847. By 1860, the Methodist minister had established a weekday school and by 1864 had been appointed by the government to be Indian agent among the Yakama Indians near present day Yakima, Washington. Wilbur eventually became one of the most important figures in President Grant's Peace Policy, which was an effort to partner with the church to assimilate Native Americans. Under the guidance of Wilbur and his wife, Yakama Indians increased significantly the amount of acreage cultivated. The Methodist minister promoted self-sufficiency and fostered the buying and selling of cattle and the development of a steam sawmill and shingle mill. Wilbur was renowned for physically subduing both Indians and white men; his friendship with Native Americans is credited with calming several potentially violent situations. But if the region would later exhibit strong ecumenical tendencies, Wilbur was hardly an agent for cooperation with Catholics. Fighting the advance of Catholicism onto the Yakima and Nez Perce reservations, Wilbur reflected a vigorous commitment to Protestant Christianity's role in shaping the Pacific Northwest.

Perhaps the best example of the creative impulses and paradoxical nature of religion in the region is provided by the story of Mark Matthews. Matthews was born in the South two years after the end of the Civil War. Raised as an evangelical Southern Presbyterian, Matthews blended religion and politics in an unusual manner for a Southerner. He came to Seattle's First Presbyterian Church in 1902 and created the city's first megachurch, one of the first in the country. Equally committed to revival and social reform, he might preach a sermon on one Sunday calling parishioners to accept Christ as their personal savior and another, the next week, extolling the virtues of the city manager form of government—or on the need to vote for park bonds, or the necessity of day nurseries for working mothers, or a sermon containing the more traditional attacks on the vices of gambling, alcohol, and prostitution. Matthews's entrepreneurial instincts seemed liberated in the Pacific Northwest; he started the nation's first church-owned radio station and was elected as a freeholder to rewrite the city's charter. Few doubted Matthews's influence on city politics or on the middle-class leadership of the city.

The Pacific Northwest has seen more than its fair share of individuals who

seemed to break the mold. Perhaps distance from the home office helps account for some of the creative solutions to peculiar problems in the region. The story of Gertrude Apel helps illuminate this. Born in the Midwest, Apel grew up in the Methodist faith and went to the Chicago Evangelistic Institute and McCormick Theological Seminary. She was the first woman ordained within the Methodist Church in 1918. She first served as a pastor in Glacier Park district and then as a circuit rider in eastern Washington. From 1920 to 1929, she served five rural churches from Twisp to Mazama and then was called to be associate pastor of Trinity Methodist Church in Seattle's Ballard neighborhood. It was her interest in the ecumenical movement and in social justice that marked her career for distinction. From 1929 until she retired in 1959, Apel led the Seattle Council of Churches and oversaw the shift from an interest in personal moral behaviors to broader issues of social and public policy. In 1932, for example, the council opposed national rearmament and favored diplomatic recognition of the Soviet Union. During the Second World War, the council actively supported Japanese Americans in the Pacific Northwest in the face of their internment. Reverend Apel helped establish the legitimacy of ecumenical activity in the region that has persisted to the present.

The period from the 1960s to the present saw the rise of a different form of cultural conflict in American society, and this has certainly been true in the Pacific Northwest. Religious impulses have played a prominent role in defining the contours of this conflict, and a number of religious figures have emerged in the region that reflect these tendencies. The Civil Rights movement in Seattle was strongly influenced by the leadership of African American clergy. None were more influential than Samuel McKinney. A vigorous proponent of civil rights, McKinney led successful fights for open housing ordinances as well as one of the nation's most comprehensive busing programs in the Seattle School District.

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The archbishop of the Catholic Church in Seattle, Raymond Hunthausen, attracted national attention in 1982 for his public admission that he was withholding half of his income tax in protest against government foreign policy and defense spending. In 1981, the Church Council of Greater Seattle asked that congregations offer sanctuary to Central American refugees. In response, twelve Christian, Unitarian, and Jewish congregations ended up hiding refugees from the INS, providing them food and shelter. In fact, Seattle emerged as one of the most active communities in the nation in the sanctuary movement. In 1985, immigration agents arrested seven Salvadorans accorded sanctuary by the University Baptist Church in Seattle. Ultimately, the United States government chose not to challenge the work of these churches. The religious community of the Pacific Northwest had revealed creative ways to demonstrate its conviction by standing against the federal government.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, there are a host of interesting religious entrepreneurs in the Pacific Northwest. Far from being unattached to religious orthodoxy or biblical mandates, many of these individuals, churches, and organizations are wrestling with how to hold old wine in new wineskins. For example, Emerald City Outreach Ministries, organized in 1987 by an African American, Harvey Drake Jr., is modeled on principles of Christian Community Development established by Reverend John Perkins. During the last decade, Drake and his staff have engaged thousands of youth and families in the Rainier Valley in programs that include academic mentoring, early childhood education, training in technology, small business development, job preparation, and peer support. Ron Vignec, a graduate of Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, has emerged as one of the most creative pastoral leaders in the largest federal housing community in the West. Vignec works easily with gang members, Vietnamese immigrants, social service agencies, other pastors, and police in efforts to make a difference in one of Tacoma, Washington's most challenging neighborhoods. As one of Vignec's colleagues said, "Both sides are frightfully uncomfortable with him—the evangelicals feel he is way too socially concerned and the liberals think his 'Jesus/Bible' stuff is over the top."

#### CONTINUING CHALLENGES

The bicentennial of Lewis and Clark's remarkable journey into the Pacific Northwest provides a good opportunity to reflect on the character of the region's religious history. In spite of living in the least-churched region, Protestants and Catholics have helped shape the public policies, social ethos, and cultural landscape of the Pacific Northwest from the middle of the nineteenth century to the present. At their worst, Catholics and Protestants played a major role, as elsewhere, in the subjugation of Native American culture. Protestants and Catholics also fought bitterly among themselves, as they did during the 1920s, when Protestants attempted to end the Catholic school system. At their best, they shaped an emerging urban culture and established a significant number of educational, health care, and social service agencies and institutions. These religious groups succeeded in extending protection to those most vulnerable in the society. Single women and children, non-Caucasians, recent immigrants, and the laboring poor have all been served by the volunteer efforts, ministries, and financial resources dedicated to resolving significant social problems in the region. Catholics and Protestants have provided schools, hospitals, and orphanages; they have worked for the homeless, the mentally ill, the sexually abused, migrant workers, and other victims. In issues related to the environment and to poverty, mainline Christians cooperate through ecumenical organizations in an effort to bring leverage on city, state, and national governments.

However, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, individuals and organizations of mainline churches in the Pacific Northwest face a number of signifi-

cant challenges in their efforts to continue influencing the public policy and social ethos of the region. Ongoing political and social debates produce tension between the grassroots congregational level and the denominational leaders at the national and state level. As is the case around the country, this is often exacerbated by declining financial support from congregations and parishes for ecumenical activity. Within most mainline churches, tension arises primarily over the issue of homosexuality—whether to allow practicing homosexuals to become ordained. To this and other issues, the more conservative cultures of eastern Washington and Oregon produce different responses than the more liberal cultures of the western regions. There is no longer a united front.

Although mainline Protestants and Catholics in the Pacific Northwest do not benefit as much from the European ethnic identities that support religious groups elsewhere in America, these denominational expressions are not going away easily. From colleges and universities to social services and congregations, mainline Protestants and Catholics are poised to reshape their engagement with the culture of the Northwest one more time. In this, it will be imperative for Catholics, Lutherans, Methodists, Episcopalians, and others to work harder to rediscover or rearticulate compelling reasons to be identified with these historic faiths. One thing is certain in the Pacific Northwest—people will not stay loyal to a denomination simply for the sake of loyalty. The region is truly a free marketplace when it comes to religion. Interestingly, the distinct periods of cultural engagement described above have generally lasted for no longer than fifty years—and we have been in the current period for approximately forty years. A whole new dynamic could be on the horizon. Perhaps it will be the next generation that will lead a renaissance of interest in the traditional expressions of Christianity. But time is running out. We might be witnessing the passing of a culture much as Native Americans witnessed the passing of their culture shortly after the coming of Lewis and Clark. ⊕

*DALE E. SODEN is professor of history and politics and director of the Weyerhaeuser Center for Christian Faith and Learning at Whitworth College, Spokane, Washington.*