



Religion in the American West: Its History and Probable Future

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Most accounts of the history of religion in America overlook the story of the great American West. The sprawling region that stretches from Canada to Mexico and from the Missouri River to the Pacific somehow seems to defy precise analysis. But this is an unfortunate omission. Not only have western churches and clerics played crucial roles in forging their respective communities, now—at the onset of the twenty-first century—the story of western religion may well be setting the stage for national religious life in the years to come.¹

THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE EARLY AMERICAN WEST

As Anglo-American settlers moved across the Missouri River in the years after the Civil War, they all confronted the same dilemmas. The most obvious involved nature, which somehow seemed to loom larger on the Great Plains than it had in Vermont, Virginia, or the Ohio Valley. Immigrant settlers on the upper Great Plains frequently confronted weather more violent than any Euro-American farmers—outside of Siberia or northern Scotland—had ever faced before. In addi-

¹This essay is largely derived from Ferenc Morton Szasz, *The Protestant Clergy in the Great Plains and Mountain West, 1865–1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988; paperback edition, University of Nebraska Press, 2004), and Szasz, *Religion in the Modern American West* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000).

Religion played an important, if often overlooked, part in the shaping of the American West. Now, religion in the West serves as a paradigm for the shape of twenty-first century religion in the United States.

tion, everyone confronted a lack of wood and water. As an old Oklahoma native once remarked: “If there’s a tree and it ain’t growing on a river, it ain’t there.”²

Early arrivals on the Great Plains were equally awed by the vast distances with relatively few people. In 1879, Charlie O’Keefe of Sheridan County, Nebraska, noted that seeing a neighbor was not something that happened every day. In 1908, Jewish settler Sophie Turpin traveled by wagon twenty-five miles from Fargo to her North Dakota homestead without spotting another person. May Embery, who grew up on the plains of eastern New Mexico, once recalled that a visitor was “the most precious thing in the world.”³ In many regions of the West today, this situation has not changed all that much. Modern-day Nevada writer Linda Husa put it thus: “State boundaries don’t define us, but our geography does, and our work and our love of the stillness and our feeling that we belong to a community without boundaries.”⁴

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But Husa has overlooked a crucial aspect of the western experience. For people faced with an awesome nature and relatively few neighbors, churches and synagogues proved central in forging the “social boundaries” they needed to survive. This proved especially true for the immigrant churches, which soon emerged as the key frontier locations where one could hear the old language, smell the smells of Europe, and savor the taste of ethnic foods. Thus, it made a great deal of difference whether one were, say, Swedish Methodist, Icelandic Lutheran, or Russian German. Religious identity became the primary lens through which most western settlers viewed the world around them.

All the clerics responded to the vast spaces of the West in the same way: they took to the road to serve their scattered congregations. Along the lower Rio Grande Valley, Catholic priests developed portable “mass kits.” On the Idaho-Washington border, a Lutheran minister devised a similar “communion kit,” while other Lutheran pastors turned into *Reiseprediger*, or circuit riders. Pioneer rabbis followed the same path. As a Texas Methodist bishop once remarked, the other denominations had simply “out-itinerated the itineracy itself.”⁵

As the western clerics were usually rather well educated for their day, they often wore a number of hats. They served as counselors, teachers, and general pur-

²Gary Lantz and Don House, *Buffalo Creek Chronicles: Diary of a Cattle Ranch on the Southern Plains* (Fayetteville, AR: Phoenix International, 2002) 3.

³Mae Embery (daughter of evangelist S. Y. Jackson), in discussion with the author, Albuquerque, Spring 1980.

⁴See Linda Husa, Sophie Sheppard, and Carolyn Dufurrena, *Sharing Fencelines: Three Friends Write from Nevada’s Sagebrush Corner* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2002).

⁵Cited in Hamilton W. Pierson, *In the Brush: Or, Old-Time Social and Religious Life in the Southwest* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1881) 4.

veyors of “culture.” Dakota evangelist C. S. Coddington found that settlers approached him for advice that ranged from spiritual matters to the best way to break sod. Southern Baptist L. R. Millican once noted that his West Texas ranchers often saved up their most difficult theological questions for his semiannual visits. When Lutheran minister John Blegen entered the sod home of a recently arrived North Dakota immigrant in 1882, the man burst into tears, cursing the day he had left Norway. “I reminded him that the faithful and merciful God was also to be found in this place,” Blegen later wrote, “and that He does not desert those who hold themselves near to Him.”⁶ Pioneer clerics had to be very versatile, indeed.

Initially, many western communities looked to their priests and ministers to help with schooling. The well-funded Protestant Episcopal Church set up numerous academies to educate both Native American children and the daughters of the Anglo elite. By the 1920s, the San Francisco Catholic parochial school system enrolled about one-third of the city’s children; the Los Angeles Catholic schools enrolled about the same percentage, with many of the children originally hailing from Mexico. The extensive Lutheran parochial systems of the upper Middle West helped mitigate criticism from the German rationalists. In New Mexico and Utah, the Presbyterians established a far-flung network of parochial schools to educate Hispanic and Latter-day Saints (LDS) children.

Pioneer clerics played the same vital role in setting up the first western health care systems. The Catholic Church established numerous hospitals in mining and railroad towns, run entirely by nuns and supported by a compulsory tax on each worker. The Episcopalians and Presbyterians also established a number of hospitals in the Southwest to care for those with lung diseases. Reform rabbi William S. Friedman founded the National Jewish Hospital in Denver in 1899, which served the entire region. As Episcopal Bishop Daniel Tuttle once noted, when the church takes the lead in caring for human needs, one seldom hears any serious criticism of it. A 1902 Denver observer put it even more bluntly: “If a new hospital is wanted or a new college is wanted, it is the church people of the locality who are called upon to meet the expense of it.”⁷

Thus, the pioneer clergy were expected to fulfill the needs of their congregations and reach out to the larger community as well. On numerous occasions, they opened their church buildings to provide a neutral “sacred space” for hard-edged purely political discussions on local matters. Thus, the pioneer clergy often found themselves positioned at the very heart of their local communities.

CONFLICT AND COOPERATION

Since organized religion deals with matters of ultimate concern, one can expect a certain amount of tension among religious groups. But unlike the situation

⁶Theodore C. Blegen, ed., “John B. Blegen: A Missionary Journey on the Dakota Prairies in 1888,” *North Dakota Historical Quarterly* 1 (1927) 23.

⁷*Denver Post*, 29 July 1902.

east of the Mississippi, the religious tension in the American West usually carved out its own unique path. For example, the region witnessed virtually no anti-Semitism. Rabbis were viewed as “the Jewish minister,” and the Jewish agricultural experiments on the northern Great Plains were considered simply another ethnic colony. New Mexico, Utah, Arizona, and Idaho all had Jewish mayors and/or governors long before Illinois or New York. San Francisco became the first large American city to accord Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur the same public recognition as Good Friday.

The two main areas of socioreligious tension in the West revolved around the LDS/Gentile standoff in Utah and Idaho and the Catholic/Pueblo Indian/Protestant interaction in New Mexico. Historian Jan Shipps has wryly observed that when most historians write about the West, they tend to overlook “the hole in the doughnut.” The “hole,” of course, belongs to the LDS community, which arrived in the valley of the Great Salt Lake in 1847 and continues as the dominant social force yet today. On their trek West, Shipps suggests, the Saints blended their identity with that of Ancient Israel to emerge, in the words of 1 Peter 2:9: “an holy nation, a peculiar people” (KJV). When Gentiles began to arrive in significant numbers about twenty years later, they inaugurated the longest-running cultural standoff in American History.⁸ At times, as with the Mountain Meadows Massacre of 1857 and several recent tragic incidents, this tension has erupted into violence. But even when it remained peaceful, LDS and non-LDS groups usually dealt with each other at arm’s length.

A similar religio-cultural tension emerged in the American Southwest, particularly New Mexico. Franciscan missionaries had arrived in the region in the 1500s, and under Spanish rule many Pueblo Indian groups absorbed several aspects of the Catholic faith. But most Pueblos also followed their traditional religious practices in secret as well. The result was one part syncretism and two parts parallel religious traditions.

When the Protestants began to arrive in the region with the coming of the railroad in the 1880s, they expressed dismay at the noticeable lack of public education. So, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists all established extensive parochial school systems in the region. These schools lasted until the late 1920s, when state-supported education finally clicked into place. Only a handful remain today.

The Protestant-Catholic cultural tension in the Southwest seldom erupted into violence, but it remained firmly in place until the Vatican II era. Since the 1960s, however, there has been much more dialogue, and the well-known Catholic positions on such issues as abortion and homosexual marriage have picked up strong support from conservative evangelical Protestants, groups that have grown rapidly in the area since the Second World War.

One finds isolated cases of similar Protestant-Catholic tension on the north-

⁸See Jan Shipps’s classic account, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985).

ern Great Plains, as gently spoofed by Garrison Keillor in his *Prairie Home Companion* radio show; but seldom has this standoff extended to anything beyond occasional harsh words. For the most part, Protestants and Catholics in the West have learned to get along with one another, perhaps out of necessity. Consequently, the theme of overt conflict has never dominated the story of western religious life. Somehow the region usually contained sufficient space to allow each group to carve out its own niche in relative peace.

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In fact, one could argue that a good deal of western religion has spilled over denominational boundaries to forge a broad-based, ecumenical literature. This theme, surprisingly, may be clearly seen in the often overlooked world of cowboy poetry.

A large number of cowboy poems and songs deal with religious issues. God was variously termed as “the Head Boss,” “the Trail Boss,” “the Sky Boss,” or “the Sky Pilot.” Everyone would eventually head to the “Golden Stairs,” the “Last Roundup,” or “Judgment Day.” Most cowboy poems avoided specific denominational concerns and, unlike much of contemporary evangelical hymnody, seldom turned “preachy.” Instead, they reflected on the ambiguity of life on the often harsh open range.

This view may be clearly seen in “The Ballad of Silver Jack” (supposedly based on a real incident) where Jack once attacked a rationalist coworker for maligning the faith of his mother. The last four verses read:

But at last Jack got him under
And slugged him once or twice
And Bob straightway acknowledged
The Divinity of Christ

But Jack kept reasoning with him
Till the poor cuss gave a yell
And allowed he’d been mistaken
In his views concerning hell.

So the fierce discussion ended
And they got up from the ground
Then someone fetched a bottle out
And kindly passed it round

And we drank to Jack’s religion
In a solemn sort of way
And the spread of infidelity
Was checked in camp that day.⁹

⁹Cited in Szasz, *Protestant Clergy*, 84–85.

One sees this theme as well in S. Omar Barker's "A Cowboy's Christmas Prayer" (1950), said to have been a favorite of President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Born in 1894, and the self-proclaimed "Poet Lariat of New Mexico," Barker was not a regular churchgoer. But he penned a generalized version of western Christianity in his famous lines:

Don't let no hearts be bitter, Lord
 Don't let no child be cold.
 Make easy beds for them that's sick
 And them that's weak and old....
 I've seen ol' cows a-starvin',
 And it ain't no happy sight;
 Please don't leave no one hungry
 Lord, on Thy good Christmas night.¹⁰

Perhaps the ultimate expression of western cowboy poetry ecumenism came with Charles Badger Clark Jr.'s "A Cowboy's Prayer." Son of a South Dakota Methodist minister, Clark wrote the poem while ranching in Arizona in 1902. First published in 1906, newspapers reprinted "A Cowboy's Prayer" so often that many sources continue to list it as "anonymous." Today, it is much in demand for western funerals, regardless of the faith of the deceased. The first and last verses read as follows:

Oh, Lord, I've never lived where churches grow.
 I love creation better as it stood
 That day You finished it so long ago
 And looked upon Your work and called it good.
 I know that others find You in the light
 That's sifted down through tinted window panes.
 And yet I seem to feel You near tonight
 In this dim, quiet starlight on the plains.

 Forgive me, Lord, if sometimes I forget.
 You know about the reasons that are hid.
 You understand the things that gall and fret;
 You know me better than my mother did.
 Just keep an eye on all that's done and said
 And right me, sometimes, when I turn aside,
 And guide me on the long, dim trail ahead
 That stretches upward toward the Great Divide.¹¹

THE WEST AS MODEL FOR TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY RELIGION

In 1902, the Episcopal bishop of Boise observed that "the American who is being developed in the Far West is going to be quite as important a factor in our country's future for good or evil as the one who is being molded in our great [east-

¹⁰Cited in Szasz, *Religion*, 46–47.

¹¹As found in *Cowboy Poetry*, ed. Julie Saffel (Edison, NJ: Castle, 2001) 154.

ern, urban] centers.”¹² I believe the bishop to have been an able prophet, and I think his statement is even more applicable for the twenty-first century. Consequently, I would like to conclude with six general observations on the nature of religion in the modern American West.

First, it seems obvious that the traditional forms of Judeo-Christian morality no longer hold the same cultural dominance over national life that they had in previous decades. As Catholic historian Charles R. Morris phrased it, modern American culture has become “highly latitudinarian.” Deciding which purveyor of “symbolic reality” sets the prevailing cultural tone is a risky business, but one can hazard a guess that it somehow revolves around “the media.” Hollywood, television, rock music, comic books, the internet, the press, modern novelists, and so on have combined to create a cultural atmosphere that if not exactly “secular” is not exactly “religious” either. Film, and by extension, video and television, have usually been targeted as the chief agents in this cultural transformation. The *New York Times* recently noted that Americans rent over six million videocassette movies each day, as compared to the three million items checked out of public libraries; the average American watches fifteen hundred hours of television every year.

By its very nature, film cannot easily convey Judeo-Christian symbols or value systems. This is due in part to the fact that religious themes often do not have great audience appeal. But the primary cause, as literary critic Simone Weil has noted, is that film (and literature) usually turn reality “upside down.” In real life, evil is monotonous and boring, while the good is endlessly exciting. But in film, the reverse is true. On-screen evil can be repulsive and fascinating at the same time. On-screen good, on the other hand, usually ends up as dull and boring. The theme of goodness simply has no story.¹³

“whoever tells the stories defines the culture”

As historians, folklorists, and psychologists have long understood, whoever tells the stories defines the culture. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the dominant western stories often echoed biblical themes—the search for the kingdom of God, the quest for Zion in the wilderness, the chance of personal or social redemption. In their better renditions, these stories were laced with ambiguity, irony, allusion, and mystery. No longer. The modern storytellers have had problems incorporating these multiple layers of meaning into their tales. As the twenty-first century begins, it is hard to find a common spiritual frame of reference in the dominant forms of storytelling. Thus, it is under a largely secular umbrella that the organized forces of western religion must prepare to meet the new century. It is highly likely that in the twenty-first century, most organized religious groups

¹²Cited in Szasz, *Religion*, 193.

¹³See also Ferenc M. Szasz, “The Clergy and the Myth of the American West,” *Church History* 59 (Dec. 1990) 497–506.

will assume the roles historically played by the Mennonites, Jews, ethnic churches, and Mormons of an earlier day: they will all become “outsiders.”

Second, although the national prominence of the mainline denominations may have slipped somewhat, the activities of the western churches and synagogues are still vital to their local communities. The prominence of hundreds of parochial schools, church-related day care centers, support groups, welfare distribution centers, and involvement in environmental issues means that organized religion remains alive and well on a local personal level, where it really counts. Even if the churches have become “outsiders,” they are the most important outsiders that any western community can have.

Third, the powerful Mormon Church has changed considerably during the last century. In 1947, Utah held 55 percent of the world’s LDS population; half a century later, the figure was 17 percent. The church expects to reach about 12 million members worldwide within a few years, as it has doubled its growth since 1980. There are currently more Mormons than Episcopalians or Congregationalists; they are closing in rapidly on the Presbyterians. In spite of critics who continue to label them as a “sect,” the LDS Church insists that it lies firmly within the Christian camp.

More than any other mainstream group—for such they have largely become—the Latter-day Saints embody traditional American middle-class, Judeo-Christian virtues. As sociologist Arnold Mauss has noted, they will probably continue to walk a delicate line between their traditional role as outsiders and their newfound position of “representatives of the traditional mainstream.”¹⁴ For mainstream western churches and LDS leaders to learn to cooperate more fully on issues of mutual concern will demand much more enlightened leadership than has hitherto been the case.

Fourth, the Asian and Near Eastern faiths, particularly Buddhism and Islam, are here to stay. With the enactment of new immigration laws in 1965, with even higher Asian and Middle Eastern quotas passed in 1990, these groups are certain to increase. Islam stands on the verge of becoming the nation’s second-largest non-Christian faith. Ever since the 1930s, it has had considerable appeal to the African American community. Since the tragedy of September 11, 2001, of course, the average westerner has become much more aware of the Islamic presence in the United States.

The various New Age faiths, many of which have borrowed heavily from the nature ethic of the various Native American religious traditions, continue to expand as well, although it is very difficult to arrive at any accurate figures. The traditional native perspective on the sacredness of the environment has also become a concern of most mainline groups, as well as the Mormons, the Orthodox Churches, and the Assemblies of God. All have pointed to a biblical basis for in-

¹⁴Armand L. Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

creased stewardship of the western environment. Perhaps this might serve as a basis for some form of twentieth-century ecumenism.

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Fifth, the western states have also become home to a vigorous Protestant neo-evangelicalism that shows no signs of slowing down. This evangelical movement has proven far more flexible than anyone could have predicted. In many cases, it has modified its stance on alcohol, homosexuality, and biblical literalism. The related Pentecostal faiths—with appeal to black and, increasingly, Hispanic audiences—also show similar growth patterns. In fact, sociologist Donald E. Miller has suggested that the West Coast-based groups such as Vineyard Fellowship, Calvary Chapel, and Hope Chapel may well serve as the “new paradigm” churches for the coming century.¹⁵ The spread of these evangelical groups insures that a biblically based minority will continue to challenge mainstream society on a variety of fronts. The various levels of government, as well as the historic mainline denominations, will need to engage in much more dialogue with these “bible-carrying Christians,” and this may not be an easy task.

Finally, the West continues to attract immigrants from all across the globe. The great western cities of Houston, Seattle, Las Vegas, Denver, San Diego, and San Francisco contain every religious organization imaginable. A new sociological study has shown how the urban Hindu temples, Buddhist temples, and Korean Presbyterian churches, etc., all play essentially the same role today as did the German Catholic, Swedish Baptist, and Norwegian Lutheran churches on the Great Plains a century earlier. Essentially, they form “halfway” houses to keep the language, foods, and culture of the old country alive while the silent process of “Americanization” works on the second generation.¹⁶

Consider Los Angeles, for example. Surveys of the Los Angeles religious scene by historian Michael Engh and geographer Barbara Weightman have discovered the following: the city—which many think serves as the prototype of the future—houses the nation’s largest Hindu shrine, which serves the estimated 10,000 Hindus in the region; a massive center for training Buddhist monks and nuns; a new Zoroastrian worship center designed to resemble an ancient Persian structure built by King Darius; plus five Islamic centers and eighty-two mosques. The Catholic Diocese of Los Angeles officially lists ninety-three different ethnic groups in its par-

¹⁵Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

¹⁶Helen Rose Fuchs Ebaugh and Janet Saltzman Chafetz, eds., *Religion and the New Immigrants: Continuities and Adaptations in Immigrant Congregations* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 2000).

ishes. Southern California priests offer Mass in forty-two languages. The region's ca. 800,000 Jews recently erected three new structures: the Museum of Tolerance, the Museum of the Holocaust, and the Los Angeles Holocaust Monument. Evangelical Protestant churches, such as the South Coast Community Church in Irvine, rank among the largest in the nation. South Coast boasts a staff of sixty-eight and a membership of over 10,000. The University of Southern California has recently begun a Center for Religion and Civic Culture with the motto: "The Los Angeles Religious Community: Working Together, Building City Neighborhoods."¹⁷

As historian Eldon G. Ernst has noted, California has never produced any religious mainstream. From the beginning, the various faiths have all been "minority" faiths, juxtaposed against a dominant secular culture. California has changed our whole understanding of what it means to be religious, Ernst argues. One might easily comprehend what it means to be religious in, say, Boise, Amarillo, or Provo, but what exactly does it mean to be religious in Los Angeles?

A 1990 Lilly Foundation report concluded that the majority of Californians were spiritual but not conventional in their patterns of faith. Without the structures provided by the churches of the historic faith traditions, however, such spirituality often becomes formless, guided by individual whim. Consequently, many describe Los Angeles as a city filled with those who lack social ties. In such a world, religion has emerged as yet another "consumer item." Los Angeles has enormous choice in this regard. As sociologist J. Gordon Melton notes, "Los Angeles is the only place in the world that you can find all forms of Buddhism. Not even Asian countries have all forms of Buddhism."¹⁸ It is likely that Southern California will continue to lead the nation in this incredible range of religious options. If western individualism is more spiritual than atheistic, and all surveys suggest that this is so, then those traditions that can best respond to this situation will be those that will thrive in the future.

The French philosopher André Malraux once proclaimed that the twenty-first century would either be a spiritual century or it would not be. If so, then the American West provides a variety of options from which the century might choose. ⊕

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¹⁷Barbara A. Weightman, "Changing Religious Landscapes in Los Angeles," *Journal of Cultural Geography* 14 (Fall-Winter 1993) 1–15; Michael E. Engh, "A Multiplicity and Diversity of Faiths: Religion's Impact on Los Angeles and the Urban West, 1890–1940," *Western Historical Quarterly* 27 (Winter 1997) 463.

¹⁸Eldon G. Ernst, "Religion in California," *Pacific Theological Review* 19 (Winter 1986) 43–51; Melton, as quoted by Gustav Niebuhr, "Land of Religious Freedom Has Universe of Spirituality," *New York Times*, 30 March 1997.