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The Religious Geography of the Pacific Northwest

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A man died and arrived at the gates of heaven at a particularly busy time. Finding himself toward the back of a long line, he passed time by surveying the scene. He noticed off to one side a large group of people milling around, people he was quite confident would not be his companions in heavenly bliss. When at last his turn came to be interviewed by St. Peter, the man asked: "What are those people doing here? Why haven't you sent them where they belong?" St. Peter replied: "Oh, they're all from Seattle, and they're too wet to burn."

This joke, which aired on a local radio station and then made the rounds in Puget Sound, belongs to a long tradition of lament, both humorous and sharp, about religion in the Far West. According to Lutherans, "The Rockies are white because so many people lightened their loads by tossing their transfer papers."[1] A late nineteenth-century Anglican bishop bemoaned the "constitutional religious apathy" that marked "the people of the whole Pacific slope."[2] Shortly before World War I, a Methodist leader commented that the "air of the Northwest [is] too rare for prayer."[3] In the 1980s a Roman Catholic historian summarized the story of the

[1]Philip Nordquist (Professor of History, Pacific Lutheran University) in conversation with the author.
[2]Vincent J. McNally, "Victoria: An American Diocese in Canada," CCHA *Historical Studies* (1990) 24.
[3]Paul Little, ed., *The Pacific Northwest Pulpit* (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1915).

What does it mean when the primary religious identity of an entire region is "unchurched"? Consideration of the religious geography of the Pacific Northwest can provide insights for church people everywhere concerned with the place of religion in a complex, postmodern culture.

church in the Pacific States as "the difficult task of inspiring an indifferent people to devotion."[4]

Quips and barbs, while they cannot be accepted uncritically, provide clues to the religious dynamics of the Far West. Religion is different here. The Far West, like every other region of the country, has its own religious character—a religious environment with a particular set of dynamics. Cultural geographers have noted the remarkable staying power of all regions' distinct religious characters, despite trends toward a homogenized monoculture. Most people still adopt the religious style of the region to which they move.[5] Understanding the religious character of a region —the ways a regional religious environment with its particular dynamics affects personal, religious, and public life—can be useful for those who minister in a particular place. A regional perspective on religion involves looking at religion from two perspectives: considering how a region's distinct religious environment and dynamics affect individual and institutional religiousness there; and considering national trends as they are exemplified within and either propelled or modified by the region's religious environment and dynamics.

While the religious character of some regions, for example the South or Upper Midwest, has long been described and known, the religious character of the Far West is far less well understood. It has garnered serious attention from historians, sociologists, cultural geographers, and theologians for barely two decades. Yet, for a century and a half this region has "qualified all definitions of the religious mainstream and all pretensions to Christian hegemony."[6]

This essay explores the religious dynamics of one part of the Far West, the Pacific Northwest. It argues that a distinct religious environment with characteristic dynamics exists in this region. These dynamics shape individual and institutional religious sensibility in ways that have consequences for churches and for the region's broader public life. Far from being an aberrant frontier outpost, slow to catch up to the rest of the nation, the Pacific Northwest's religious dynamics throw into relief twenty-first-century, postmodern religious impulses.[7]

[4]Jeffrey M. Burns, "Building the Best: A History of Catholic Parish Life in the Pacific States," in *The American Catholic Parish: A History from 1850 to the Present*, ed. Jay P. Dolan (New York: Paulist, 1987).

[5]Samuel S. Hill, "Religion and Region in America," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 480 (July 1985) 132–141.

[6]Eldon Ernst, "American Religious History from a Pacific Coast Perspective," in *Religion and Society in the American West: Historical Essays*, ed. Carl Guarneri and David Alvarez (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987) 8, 13; Ernst, "The Emergence of California in American Religious Historiography," *Religion and American Culture* 11/1 (2001) 30–52.

[7]Fuller development of the ideas that follow can be found in *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: In the None Zone*, ed. Patricia O'Connell Killen and Mark Silk (Lanham, MD: AltaMira, 2004); Patricia O'Connell Killen, "Christianity in the Western United States," *SPAN* (Summer 2002) 6–7, 25, 28; Killen, "Faithless in Seattle? The WTO Protests," *Religion in the News* 3/1 (2000) 12–14; and, Killen, "The Geography of a Religious Minority: Roman Catholicism in the Pacific Northwest," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 18/3 (2000) 51–72. Statistical references in this essay include Oregon, Washington, and Alaska as the Pacific Northwest. General description of the religious environment holds for northern Idaho and western Montana. Montana is the hinge state between Midwest and Northwest religious sensibility.

PACIFIC NORTHWEST—A RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHIC SNAPSHOT

Religious demographics offer a glimpse into what is different about religion in the Pacific Northwest. First, the region is "unchurched" and always has been. Its religious adherence rate reached the nation's 1890 rate of 34.4% in 1970. In 2000 the Northwest's adherence rate was 37.2%, while the nation stood at 59.4%. Keeping the regional rate steady in the mid-30% range between 1970 and 2000 took considerable effort, as the region's population increased by 70% (over four million people) during that period.[8] The past thirty years in the Pacific Northwest illustrates cultural geographers' observations about the staying power of regional religious cultures. This one remains largely unchurched.

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The majority of northwesterners, 62.8%, do not participate in church, synagogue, mosque, or temple. The unchurched majority contains two groups, the "nones" and the "identifiers." "Nones" are adults who, when asked in a phone survey, "What is your religion, if any?" answer, "None." They comprise 25% of the region's adult population, the highest of any region in a nation where "nones" constitute the single fastest growing religious group.[9] Regional "nones" are mostly white, male, married, over forty, employed full-time, own their own home, and have grown children. In short, they are conventional, not marginal cultural refugees. In the Northwest, not identifying with established religion is ordinary rather than countercultural.

Though they lack meaningful ties to religious institutions, "nones" are not irreligious. Fewer than 2% are atheist or agnostic. Most are spiritually inclined, and agree that "God exists" and that God "intervenes in their lives." "Nones" exemplify religiousness constructed beyond religious institutions and beyond identification with historic religious faiths.[10]

The second and slightly larger group among the unchurched is the "identifiers." These are adults who, when asked, "What is your religion, if any?" name a religious community, but do not belong to a congregation of any religion. They identify with a historic faith, but do not participate institutionally. Though sheer numbers make "identifiers" significant, little is known about them. It is not clear what identifying but not participating means to these people. They may be on a path toward becoming "nones"; they may be an untapped market of potential congregational members, people with a reservoir of religious commitment that can be

[8]Killen and Silk, *Religion and Public Life*, 26, 29–30.

[9]American Religious Identification Survey, online at http://www.gc.cuny.edu/studies/key_findings.htm.

[10]Killen and Silk, *Religion and Public Life*, 39–40.

mobilized; they may be both. Whatever identifying but not belonging means, it is the position of most people in the region.[11]

Understanding what shapes the religious imagination of "nones" and "identifiers" and how that imagination is shaped would provide insight into how human beings are thinking about the meaning of human life, relationships between the human and the more-than-human, and civil society in the twenty-first century. Are their imaginations informed in any way by the theological and liturgical heritages of any of the world's historic faiths? Is this unchurched population the place where adaptation and innovation in human religiousness for the twenty-first century is occurring, as religious institutions suffer the fate of all late-modern institutions?

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While 62.8% of the population remains outside of religious organizations, 37.2% of the population is in religious organizations in some way. These are the religious adherents. They are the minority in the Pacific Northwest and have been since earliest Euro-American settlement.

Adherents here are divided among many different groups, making the region's institutional religion pluralistic. In all other national regions, fewer groups capture more of the adherents, making those regions more homogenous. "In the Northwest, two-thirds of all religious adherents affiliate with the top five groups. In other regions, the top five groups capture 75 to 85 percent of all adherents."[12]

Not only are adherents divided among many different religious groups, the pattern of predominance among groups in the region differs in significant ways from the national pattern. This divergence has increased steadily since the mid-1950s when, while all the slices were smaller, the region's adherent pie mirrored the nation's.[13]

Catholics continue to be the single largest religious group in the Pacific Northwest, as they have been from the beginning. However, they comprise only 11.3% of northwesterners, compared to 22% of all Americans. The tradition is not dominant here as it is nationally and in other regions.

The second and third largest religious families in the Pacific Northwest, Holiness/Wesleyan/Pentecostal and "Other Conservative Christians," rank fifth and sixth nationally. Latter-day Saints are fourth regionally but only tenth nationally. Baptists are fifth regionally but second nationally.

[11]Ibid., 38–39.

[12]Ibid., 33.

[13]The following discussion closely follows Killen and Silk, *Religion and Public Life*, 32–33.

In the Pacific Northwest there are as many conservative Protestants as Catholics. The Northwest is the only region outside the South and old Southwest for which this is the case. However, in the South conservative Protestants are mostly Baptist. In the Northwest most are Pentecostal and nondenominational Christian.[14]

The Northwest is home to a relatively small black population, which helps to explain why historically African American Protestant bodies rank seventh regionally, though they rank third nationally. In the Pacific Northwest, Eastern religions rank eighth, higher than Methodism (ninth), Presbyterianism (tenth), Confessional/Reformed (eleventh), or Judaism (twelfth), while nationally this family ranks lower than these four traditions. In the Northwest the size of the Eastern religions' slice of the adherent pie is comparable to or larger than that of Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Christians (Disciples), or United Church of Christ.[15]

In the Pacific Northwest, then, fewer people are attached to religious organizations than anywhere else in the nation. Those who are attached are divided among many different groups. The pattern of predominance among these groups diverges significantly from the national pattern. The Pacific Northwest is the only region with a high concentration of both "nones" and conservative Christians. Roman Catholics and Protestant denominations of the magisterial Reformation make up a smaller segment of the adherent pie in the Northwest than elsewhere.

The Religious Environment of the Pacific Northwest

The religious demographics of the Pacific Northwest are a consequence of and contribute to the region's religious environment. While few features of that environment are unique to the region, they converge here in a particular way.

The central feature of the Northwest's religious environment is the absence of a "single persistently dominant, strongly institutionalized religious reference group." Since earliest Euro-American settlement, the Pacific Northwest has lacked a single denomination or religious community present in sufficient numbers for a sufficient period of time to "constitute a dominant public force with which all must contend."[16] Successive waves of immigration as in other parts of the West, coupled with factors such as high intraregional mobility, have militated against the growth of a significant religious establishment. The Pacific Northwest has no denominational equivalent to Baptists in the South or Lutherans in the Upper Midwest. What comes closest is the unchurched.

With the majority of its population unchurched, including a "none" group twice the size of the leading denomination, the region lacks broad social reinforcement for participation in religious institutions. As a result, religion has not functioned as a major mechanism of social control in the Pacific Northwest.

[14]Ibid., 32.

[15]Ibid., 33.

[16]Ibid., 12. The remaining portion of the section draws heavily on 12–15.

The region's religious institutions are fragile. Most lack numerical depth, and so quickly exhibit either the stress or vigor occasioned by social and cultural trends affecting religion both regionally and nationally. Church "planters" from the South, unfamiliar with adherent thinness, are puzzled by the reluctance of most Northwest pastors to participate in aggressive ventures to establish more churches. They miss the other side of an environment that leaves religious institutions fragile, namely, room and impetus for innovation and experimentation, sometimes in surprising directions.

The physical geography—the space and grandeur of the region—also shapes its religious environment. Nature dwarfs the human here. Denominational histories are replete with complaints about scattered people whom diligent pastors must ferret out and coax into congregations. They are full of stories about heroic ministers who by wit and will overcome the region. For religious institutional bureaucrats, the region's geography continues to be an obstacle to be conquered.

Nineteenth-century romantic writers and many contemporary environmentalists and authors find the region's physical environment a religious experience in itself, a place to face human mortality, often a place of mystical union. Others, however, have been daunted by the region's natural environment, a response captured by the character Hank Stamper in Ken Kesey's *Sometimes a Great Notion*: "And for *another* thing, there was nothing, *not a thing*, about the country that made a man feel Big And Important. If anything it made a man feel dwarfed....Important? Why, there was something about the whole blessed country that made a soul feel whipped before he got started."[17]

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Physical, social, and psychic mobility also play a role in the region's religious environment. Sociologist Rodney Stark, among others, has argued that mobility helps to account for low levels of religious adherence and the relative weakness of institutions in the Far West. Historically, mobility has been higher in the West, though recent census data shows that actual physical mobility is now greater in some regions with higher religious adherence rates. Still, the possibility of moving, of finding something better, remains part of the western psyche. Few people come to the Far West seeking what they left behind. Most hold dreams of a better life. Physical mobility and psychological mobility reinforce each other. When persons move west they must choose to reconnect to social institutions, to be part of communities. Having left one community, they find it easier to leave another and harder to reconnect.

[17]Cited in *Religion and Public Life*, 15–16.

Just as persons must choose to reconnect to social institutions, they also must choose again to be who they will be. The possibility that one might move tends to reinforce a pattern of keeping personal options open and commitment tentative. Coupled with a western penchant to keep focused on new opportunities, especially economic opportunities, many people in the Far West are reluctant to make commitments to institutions. Geographic, social, and psychic mobility offer options and sever social relationships.

With little social reinforcement for religious participation, belonging to a religious community in the Pacific Northwest requires repeated, deliberate choice and effort. Constantly reaffirming the choice takes energy. Northwesterners work to make religious belief, activity, and institutions real and significant in their lives. Past and present they have been preoccupied with the size of congregations, buildings, and programs. Examples include the significance to local Presbyterians of First Presbyterian Church in Seattle having been the largest congregation in the denomination during the early twentieth century; the *Catholic Sentinel* of the Archdiocese of Portland claiming to be the largest Catholic weekly in the world, at a time when Catholics made up less than ten percent of Oregon's population; and Protestants and Catholics building and maintaining church-related colleges and universities in numbers disproportionate to their segment of the population.[18]

"Open" best describes the Pacific Northwest's religious environment. With few people in church, many religious groups present, and the unchurched serving as the dominant religious reference group, religiously the region is open to many interpretations and possibilities. Indifferent or inviting to religion, obstacle or opportunity, refuge or revelation—the region is any and all of these. The Northwest has a highly elastic religious reality. In this environment, boundaries and identities are fluid; energy and movements coalesce and then dissolve. Religious identity and commitment and their consequences are complex and contradictory. Here, at different and sometimes the same moment, there are simultaneous tendencies, on the one hand, to cooperation across and beyond religious institutions and, on the other, "to almost sectarian religious conflicts and extremes, and to religious indifference. In this environment the question of boundaries—physical, social, and human—is constantly present. Here theological heritage, creative imagination, fascination with the new, and the promise of unlimited possibility coalesce to make religion present in both conventional and unconventional ways."[19]

Consequences for Individual and Institutional Religiousness

A number of consequences for individual and institutional religiousness flow from the Pacific Northwest's religious environment.

The lack of a dominant reference group, a social mirror, alongside which or over against which individuals can define themselves, especially when coupled with

[18]Ibid., 13.

[19]Ibid., 12.

low levels of religious adherence, "renders religious identity, commitment, and long-term belonging within a religious organization an on-going problem." "Everyone who comes into the region must negotiate his or her own religious identity, because the meaning and style of religious belonging changes in a context where commitment, experimentation, and indifference are equal."[20] In turn, the choices individuals make—to join, drop out, or switch affiliation—have greater impact here than elsewhere because of the small population within religious organizations.

The environment affects the fortunes of religious organizations in the region. Catholics and Latter-day Saints have been relatively successful, in part, because historically in these communities the church mediates salvation. The family of Holiness/Wesleyan/Pentecostal churches also has been successful, largely because they have offered a portable, intense, visceral, self-verifiable experience of the divine. All three of these groups historically succeeded in making the "supernatural" real, and so attracted people in the region in ways that more moderate Protestant denominations have not. The recent success of the region's postdenominational megachurches suggests that the capacity to make the supernatural real continues to be important in the Northwest.

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The ambiguity of the Northwest's religious environment stimulates a range of individual and institutional responses that alternate between expansiveness and self-absorption. Both reflect a preoccupation with boundaries of identity and belonging, chronic issues in the Far West. "Individual religiousness tends to be private and episodically intense. Many pursue a spiritual quest on their own, drawing from multiple traditions and practices on a journey of religious experimentation." The same ambiguity propels others toward a religious commitment "that is clearly defined, emotionally significant, and often inflexible because it has been hard won, and thus is in need of protection." For these, "highlighting boundaries between one's religious community and others helps to re-enforce identity and commitment." Hence, the same environment that provides space for wide-ranging religious experimentation and has inspired creative innovations in leadership and cooperation across organization boundaries also feeds a sectarian impulse. The ambiguity of the region's religious environment tends to work against sustaining a large population of religious moderates.[21]

The authority of office and the authority of the laity exist in a tenuous balance

[20]Ibid., 13.

[21]Ibid., 13–14.

in the Northwest. Here the authority of religious leaders always has relied on personal charisma and persuasiveness more than office or position. Designated leaders of churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques have recognized that the existence of their congregations and their educational or social service outreach depend quite directly on the good will of members and of persons beyond the congregation's doors. This realization is closer to the surface in the Northwest than in areas with larger numbers of people in churches. Laity recognize this too, and it drives lay ownership and autonomy. Individuals have acted with marked independence in relation to religious functionaries throughout the region's history. "Even in 1860, A. M. A. Blanchet, Roman Catholic Bishop of Nesqualy, cautioned his priests against refusing to perform mixed marriages lest the Catholics choose to be married by a judge."[22]

The tendency of people to be on the move, to be disconnected from larger social networks, and to act independently even when in religious communities, has made northwesterners as a whole remarkably disinterested in their own denominational history and theology. That disinterest, when coupled with demographic thinness within denominations and in many cases the erosion of ethnic identity, creates a considerable challenge for religious communities for which the passing on of history and theology is deemed significant.

Northwesterners have tended to have a pragmatic view of religious institutions' social utility. Even those outside of faith communities historically supported religious institutions for the services they provided and as signs of civilization and progress. This contributed to ecumenical cooperation in the region. Ferenc Szasz has noted that cooperation between Protestants and Catholics and interfaith cooperation between Christians and Jews was practiced in the West for a century before it began in the Midwest, South, and East.[23] It is important to note, however, that pragmatic appreciation for conventional religious institutions did not curb people's interest in new religious movements and modes of religious organization.

Though the Northwest's open religious environment has left individuals free to pursue or abandon spiritual quests as they will, it does not allow them to ignore religion. It confronts all who enter the region with a set of tasks. These involve clarifying individual religious identity, constructing social relationships, and making sense of the place itself. In working through these tasks individuals both adopt and exhibit the Pacific Northwest's religious style and so continue to reinforce its complex religious character.

Pacific Northwest Religion: Aberration or Manifestation of the Future?

The dynamics of religion in the Pacific Northwest are complex, ambiguous, sometimes contradictory, and often illusive. Within this environment the churches

[22]Ibid., 14.

[23]Ferenc Szasz, *Religion in the Modern American West* (Tucson: University of Arizona, 2000) 100.

of the historic Christian faiths, American-born denominations, sectarian groups, and world religious traditions find refuge, challenge, a place to live out their respective religious visions. Each has been changed in its interaction with the Northwest's religious environment, and each has contributed to it. In the crucible of that religious environment, religious questions central to American thought—how to be truly free, in nature and in community—have been and continue to be lived out. Using a national, east-to-west lens, religion in the Northwest can appear anemic or aberrant. But when viewed using a regional lens, religion in the Northwest not only makes sense, it throws into relief trends and impulses that increasingly characterize the nation's religious future.

If one mark of the postmodern condition is the absence of an overarching, encompassing narrative for life, then the Pacific Northwest, indeed the entire Far West, has exhibited deep postmodern impulses for most of its history.[24] If, as sociologists have argued, we are in the throes of a process pushing inexorably in the direction of making individuals the arbiters of religious truth, then the region's religious past is rich with wisdom about how to connect individuals to the deeper resources of historic faiths.[25] The religious experience of the Pacific Northwest—indeed, the entire Far West—is a rich reservoir of knowledge about how individuals and communities can live faithfully in a complex, postmodern religious context and about how, in such a context, they can as easily forfeit the deep wisdom of their heritages and their best selves. The region's complex religious environment demands of religious leaders an equally complex and creative hermeneutic. ⊕

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[24]Ibid., 128; Robert S. Ellwood, *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening: American Religion Moving from Modern to Postmodern* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

[25]Ann Swidler, "Saving the Self: Endowment versus Depletion in American Institutions" in *Meaning and Modernity: Religion, Polity, and Self*, Richard Madsen, et al. (Berkeley: University of California, 2001); Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California, 1998); Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987).