

Session 3: Secular but Spiritual in the Pacific Northwest

GUIDING QUESTIONS Among the many people who are not active in organized religion in the Pacific Northwest, what spiritual expressions can be discovered? What do these say about the spiritual hunger and yearnings in this region?

BACKGROUND READING Introduction and Chapter 5 of *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone* (Religion by Region Series), edited by Patricia O’Connell Killen and Mark Silk, AltaMira Press, 2004. Key chapters are “Patterns of the Past, Prospects for the Future: Religion in the None Zone” (Patricia Killen) and “Secular but Spiritual in the Pacific Northwest” (Mark Shibley)

PREPARATION

- Handout (2 sides): *Secular but Spiritual in the Pacific NW*
- Candle and other items for altar/worship area
- Copies of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* or other resource for reading and singing
- Board or newsprint to record reflections.

GATHERING Ask people to share their name and identify one person they know who is a “None;” that is, when asked, “What is your religious tradition, if any?” they would likely answer, “None.”

5 minutes

OPENING WORSHIP

- Light the candle in your worship area.
- Begin with a short prayer.
- Read Psalm 8.
- Read or sing ELW 684, “Creating God, Your Fingers Trace”

5 minutes

WARMUP DISCUSSION **Discuss with the group:** People often make a distinction between being “spiritual” and being “religious.” What is the difference between the two, in your opinion?

10 minutes

Do you know individuals who would describe themselves as spiritual but not religious? In what way, if any, do they practice their spirituality?

**LARGE GROUP
TIME**
30 minutes

Distribute handouts.

When one pastor learned about those who are spiritual but secular (not religious) in the Pacific NW, he reflected:

Everyone needs to make a meaningful life, and religion of some sort serves as a structural element for making meaning... Religion is a cultural system, with beliefs and rituals, which binds people together around the experience of the sacred. In the Pacific Northwest, because there is an absence of strong traditional religious structures, people will make meaning (or respond to experiences of the sacred) in ways that they make up themselves. It is helpful to me to think of this expression of religion as “ad hoc religion.” It fits well with the “rough and ready” frontier mentality of the West. Bits and pieces of existing religious traditions, pop psychology, and reverence of nature are freely adapted and combined to produce a spiritual path.

– Aaron Couch reflection on Mark Shibley

Secular but Spiritual. Sociologist Mark Shibley, who teaches in southern Oregon, has identified three distinct “secular but spiritual” expressions which exist outside the boundaries of organized religion – in the None Zone, as it were. Yet each of these expressions has a spiritual dimension.

Summarize each category, one by one. Read excerpts if desired. Have the group respond to each. Record notes on each “spiritual yearnings” reflection on a board or newsprint. See below:

Anti-government, apocalyptic groups

- Are you familiar with this type of thinking in the community or region where you live? Do you know anyone who is persuaded by this thinking or activity?
- How do these people practice their spiritual values?
- What spiritual yearnings, questions, or impulses do you see operating here? (Note these)

“New Age” or “New Spirituality” movements

- In what ways do you see “new spirituality” expressed in your community or area? By people you know?
- How do these people practice their spiritual values?
- What spiritual yearnings, questions, or impulses do you see operating here? (Note these)

Nature religion

- In what ways does nature religion influence your community or congregation?
- In what ways are these spiritual values practiced?
- What spiritual yearnings, questions, or impulses do you see operating here? (Note these)

LARGE GROUP DISCUSSION

5 minutes

Our congregation's response

Look over the group's reflections concerning what is going on with these "secular but spiritual" folks in terms of spiritual questions or yearning.

Is there any overlap between these "secular but spiritual" expressions and the life of our congregation? What if anything might we affirm about them?

How does our congregation or its members already relate to the "spiritual but secular" people in our community? How might we grow in this?

CLOSING PRAYER

5 minutes

Close with prayer. Give thanks that God has placed within each person a yearning to be in communion with his/her creator. Ask God's guidance as we share the goodness of Christ with those around us.

Secular but Spiritual in the Pacific Northwest

25% of Pacific Northwesterners claim no formal religious identity. When asked “What is your religious tradition, if any?” they answer “None.” (The national rate for “Nones” is 14.1%.) However, it is wrong to think “Nones” are without spiritual impulses.

Seekers in the NW spiritual marketplace often find **spirituality** (direct, personal experience with the sacred) more important than **religion** (mediated, institutionalized experience with the sacred). Yet movements and even organizations do grow up around these spiritual impulses. Sociologist Mark Shibley identifies three clusters of **secular but spiritual** expression, each with distinct values and practices:

1. Anti-government, apocalyptic groups

- The Pacific Northwest is home to many such groups (e.g., Aryan Nation, Christian Patriots, the Militia, Posse Comitatus, assorted survivalists).
- They are essentially racist, armed, engaged in illegal activity, dangerous.
- They believe they are American patriots and authentic Christians, bringing order to chaos.
- They welcome or even seek to hasten the end of time (apocalypse=end times).
- salvation from destruction depends on their preparedness and willingness to fight.
- “We are engaged in a struggle to the death between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Satan” (Gordon Kahl of Posse Comitatus)
- They are not in the headlines unless pressed or threatened, but work quietly and influence spiritual values in the region.
- Spiritual impulse is “creative transcendence of calamitous cultural change.”

2. “New Age” or “New Spirituality” movements

- Powell’s Books: Between 1991 and 1998, books in the “non-Christian, non-Bible” religious category more than doubled
- Self-help spiritual practices incorporate metaphysical elements such as crystals, psychic consultations, shamanism, spirit channeling, 1987 “Harmonic Convergence.”
- A notable practitioner is Neal Donald Walsh of southern Oregon, author of the 1990’s *Conversations with God* series.
- Earth-based religions and paganism flourish — including WICCA; Aquarian Tabernacle Church of Everett, WA; Cauldron of Changes; Portland Pagan Pride. The Pagan Community Directory lists 87 organizations, half of these in the Portland area.
- The self is sacred and central, as is the natural order.
- Transformation, especially personal transformation, is key.

3. Nature religion

- Nature is not only beautiful, it is sacred; nature generates “awe” or “reverence.”
- The ancient forest is a “source for spiritual enrichment and renewal” – public lands are to be preserved as sacred sanctuary.
- Bumper stickers: “May the Forest Be With You” or “Tree-Hugger, Dirt Worshipper”

- This “faith” finds daily practice through the simple living movement, contemplative environmentalism, interest in Native American myth and ritual, deep ecology, wilderness preservation – all emerge from this move toward worship of nature and in nature – and these practices go against the dominant culture of consumerism.
- Nature spirituality grapples with what it means to be fully human and part of the region’s ecosystem.
- How we relate to the landscape is *the* dominant dimension of Pacific NW life.

Many people give testimony to spiritual encounters with nature. Southern Oregon nature activist Chant Thomas, on the verge of despair following a broken marriage, recalls setting off on a cold November morning:

I looked up, realizing the fog had ended, and stepped into the early morning sunshine. I looked out over a sea of blinding white clouds, with snowy ridges rising all around me and crowding the brilliant blue sky. Immediately in front of me, beyond the fallen dragon snag, rose a massive flat-topped Pine like a green apparition silhouetted against the snowy slopes above.

The ancient Pine beckoned me closer. Somehow I worked my way around. ... Approaching the Pine, I stepped between the boughs which reached to the ground, pausing to hold those on either side. A deeply spiritual feeling coursed through my being, not unlike the hush I felt as a young altar-boy entering the cathedral for my First Communion.

Stepping forward I instinctively hugged the tree, my long arms covering only a small fraction of the trunk’s diameter. The beautiful brown pussle-bark was already warm from the morning sun. I slipped to the ground, curling against the tree in a deep carpet of pine needles. The spirit of the tree relaxed me into my deepest sleep in a week.

... Like myself, several friends returned to the Pine to sit there for a few days and nights, fasting, praying, and singing to the tree with flute or drum. Soon the ancient Pine became known to many as the “Sacred Tree.”

(quoted by Mark A. Shibley in “The Promise and Limits of Secular Spirituality” in *Cascadia: The Elusive Utopia*, Douglas Todd ed., Ronsdale Press, 2008)

An example of a community built around “nature religion” practices is the Salmon and Hazelnut Family Fellowship (SAHFF), advertising its activities at www.malacat.net/sahff.html:

Salmon and Hazelnut Family Fellowship is a multidisciplinary Pagan Family Group in the Metropolitan area of Portland, Oregon and Vancouver, Washington. The groups and individuals of Salmon and Hazelnut Family Fellowship perform rituals and events that are more than family friendly or family tolerant, but family centered and family welcome. Our events are open to all ages and all families, traditional and non-traditional and all paths, Pagan or otherwise.”

A quick survey indicates they are nature and family oriented. It appears that each ritual event welcomes elements (land, air, fire, water) of the natural world into the gathering, and that each element is acted or played by a participant in the group. Singing, storytelling, and eating appear essential to the group’s ritual gatherings, with an expressed purpose of thanking and honoring the natural world in a spirit of joy and laughter.

SOURCES: *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone* (Religion by Region Series), edited by Patricia O’Connell Killen and Mark Silk, AltaMira Press, 2004, especially “Patterns of the Past, Prospects for the Future: Religion in the None Zone” by Patricia O’Connell Killen and “Secular but Spiritual in the Pacific Northwest” by Mark A. Shibley.