

The Religious Landscape of the Pacific Northwest

In 1914, Professor E.J. Klemme of the Washington State Normal School in Ellensburg lamented: *“The people that builded [sic] this empire...[left] the Golden Rule beyond the Rockies, and they proceeded to do others before others could do them. In the East they were faithful church members; now they are not even church [at]tenders.”* According to Klemme, the fault lay with the geography itself: *“The ascent of the Great Divide seemed too steep for church [transfer] letters. The air of the Northwest seemed too rare for prayer. We have hurried forth to conquer the wilderness, but we have been conquered by it.”* — quoted by Patricia O Connell Killen¹

Most people in the Pacific Northwest do not participate in religious institutions and never have, making non-participation “normal” here. Fewer people belong to a religious institution than in any other region of the US:

- There is little social support for religious institutions, which are not strong and never have been. There never was a “golden age” of church life here, as there was in other regions. Similarly, the region cannot be called “post-Christian” because it never was Christian.
- High mobility makes building community a challenge.
- The Pacific Northwest is an open religious environment, with many options for expression. No single religious group dominates.
- People coming here must negotiate their own religious identities, and those who believe must make a conscious effort to choose and practice their faith.

Religious Affiliation in the Pacific Northwest

Only about 1/3 of the population is religiously affiliated, while about 2/3 are “secular but spiritual.” This is the opposite of the US national pattern.

- **A little over 1/3 (37%) are affiliated with a religious group**, that is, they belong to a religious tradition or community. This includes both active members and those who participate rarely. Nationally, 59.4% are affiliated with a religious group.
- **A little over 1/3 (38%) identify with a religious group** but are not involved in any way. They may say, “I grew up Catholic, Jewish, Lutheran, or my family is...” but they themselves do not currently participate.
- **The remaining 1/4 (25%) claim no religion they are “Nones.”** That is, when asked “What is your religious tradition, if any?” they answer “None.” Nationally, the rate for “Nones” is 14.1%.

The “None” group is twice the size of the largest denomination here (Roman Catholics at 11.3% of the population). “Nones” are the fastest-growing “religious” group in the US and Pacific NW. A typical “None” in this region is spiritually inclined with no self-identified religious tradition or participation in a religious community. He is neither agnostic nor atheistic. She is mostly white, well-educated, middle class, a baby boomer, living in a metropolitan area with a spouse and no small children at home. Politically they are independent.

¹ Patricia OConnell Killen, “Patterns of the Past, Prospects for the Future: Religion in the None Zone” in *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone* (Religion by Region Series), edited by Patricia OConnell Killen and Mark Silk, AltaMira Press, 2004, p.9. This book is the source for all data in this handout.

Six Characteristics of Pacific Northwest Spirituality

1. Many people call themselves **spiritual but not religious**.
 - Don't want to be pinned down, open, fluid
 - Are open to seek and incorporate "new" practices, draw from multiple traditions
 - Individual spiritual experience is primary, as is private spiritual quest or journey
 - May seek intense emotional and physical experiences of the divine
 - "Secular but spiritual" expressions include New Age and nature-based spiritualities
2. **Rugged individualism** is alive and well.
 - Isolationism, independence, doing my own thing no matter what anyone else thinks.
 - The "conquering spirit" has implications for land use, resource extraction.
 - Correlates with wide open spaces and vast resources.
 - This is a challenge to community spirit or collective wisdom — people seek community, yet feel ambivalent about the constraints community entails.
3. The West is experienced as a **land of new beginnings and imagination**.
 - New beginnings and creativity correlate
 - Theme of starting over (again and again) with imagination
 - Rapid, uncontrolled change can be a liability
 - Question: from what are you changing and for what?
4. **Non-institutional** or **anti-institutional** tendencies influence religious life.
 - No single religious group or denomination dominates.
 - Creative and cooperative ecumenical/interfaith coalitions are necessary to amass political power and influence (examples: Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, Oregon Faith Roundtable Against Hunger, Pacific Northwest Power and Light)
5. Open and ambiguous religious culture favors **religious extremes rather than moderation**.
 - On one hand, many practice an individual, wide-ranging, experimental spiritual quest.
 - On the other hand, many embrace a religious commitment that is clearly defined, emotionally significant, and often inflexible or rigid because it has been hard won.
 - This region is difficult for sturdy religious moderates, like mainline Protestants.
6. **Entrepreneurial and enterprising religious experiments** can thrive.
 - They view the "unchurched" population as an untapped market, souls needing salvation.
 - Predominantly non-denominational (example, Pentecostal, Foursquare).
 - Led by "sectarian entrepreneurs," charismatic personalities (example, Luis Palau).
 - Skilled at the use of technology and media; dynamic, entertaining.
 - Aggressive market-based economics, corporate strategic planning, innovation.
 - Promote strict behavior code; exclusivist, evangelical theology a subculture.