

# 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 Killen<sup>1</sup>

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.

<sup>1</sup> 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.