

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.