Godless in Eden? : the Metroscape's post-modern religious life

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Near the intersection of Highways 26 and 11 in downtown Sandy, Oregon, Celtic Spirit Yoga occupies a white wooden church complete with steeple. Its website describes the building, formerly home to an Episcopal congregation, as “the perfect place” to “share the joys of yoga,” because within it “generations have asked for blessings and offered gratitude” (www.celticspirityoga.com/pages/1/index.htm). Not far away, in Boring, Oregon, Good Shepherd Community Church, with a reported average weekly attendance of 3500, occupies a sprawling campus complete with landscaping and physical plant akin to a high-tech business. Its homepage features a panoramic photograph of Mount Hood viewed from a high forest clearing and lists events such...
as a prayer institute in which people whose “need is total” can connect with a “Father” whose “resources are infinite” (www.goodshepherdcc.org). Still closer to downtown Portland, on Southeast Foster Road, United States Atheists, an organization that “promotes atheism as a positive belief system” and ministers to the “needs of non-believers,” has its headquarters (www.unitedstatesatheists.com).

An independent proprietorship focused on eclectic spiritual quests, a fading historic Protestant denomination, a thriving suburban mega church, and a home base for organized atheism—these seemingly disparate entities are both old and new on the religious landscape of the Portland metro area. They exemplify long-standing patterns in the ways people in Oregon compose individual and corporate religious journeys—fluid, unfettered individual spiritual quests that for some coalesce into communal forms that provide structure, interpersonal connections and spiritual resources. At the same time, like the growing cone on Mount St. Helens, these groups are the crust of deeper activity, three decades of global, national, and local economic, social, and cultural change that has profoundly altered the surroundings for individual and institutional religion. Viewed against this horizon, the Portland metro area’s current religious contours help to explain Oregon’s notoriety for “godlessness” and for contentious public debate over issues from physician-assisted suicide to land-use regulation. As well, they reveal postmodern religious trends that increasingly will affect public life here and elsewhere.

Long-standing Patterns in an “Open” Religious Environment

Most people in the Portland metro area pursue personalized spiritual quests outside the doors of religious institutions and always have. It took until 1971 for Oregon’s 33% religious adherence figure (the portion of the population claimed by religious organizations) to approach that of the nation at 1890, 34.4%. In 2000, the state’s adherence rate was 35.2%, and the nation’s 59.5% (religionatlas.org). As the percentage of Oregon’s population claimed by religious organizations grew over a century plus, the percentage gap between Oregon’s adherence rate and that of the nation became larger.

Historians and sociologists suggest several factors in trying to explain why the population of Oregon and Washington has remained largely averse to institutional religion. Mobility is one. Physical mobility disrupts relationships and social connections. Another is the West, figuratively and literally. Self-reliant individuals head west (or south or north or east, depending on their starting point), rarely seeking to replicate what they left behind, and expecting to succeed or fail on their own. On a quest for a better life, they keep their options open, a stance that impedes investment in social institutions. Hence, religious institutions, like other public or civic institutions in the region, lack the depth of investment on the part of the population that constitutes reliable social capital.

Historians point to another factor: the region never developed and sustained a strong cultural-religious hegemony. Beginning with a relatively thin population that has grown primarily through successive waves of in-migration, the religious and cultural face of the region always has been mixed and fluid. In any period, its public persona reflected the imported sensibility of economic and political elites alternately in tension or alignment with the cultures of newer in-migrants. To date, no wave of immigration has sufficed to create a cultural-religious hegemony comparable to Puritans in New England or Lutherans and Catholics in the Upper Midwest. In the past decade, doing so has become an explicit agenda for some evangelicals in the region.

Finally, even early Christian missionaries to the region recognized that its space and beauty affect people. The natural environment dwarfs the human here. And while a century plus of records from various denominations bemoan that people are “scattered” and that the geography makes them “indifferent” to religion, many people saw and see it differently. For many, being in nature is a religious experience. And protecting nature, the environment, is their religious cause.

The Portland metro area, with an adherence rate of 37.39%, is, like the entire region, an “open” religious environment. With most people outside the doors, there is minimal social pressure to affiliate with religious organizations. Successive waves of in-migration continue to bring old and new forms of religious thought, practice, and organization into the area, but historically, even the churched population in the region has had little concern for inherited scriptural or theological heritages. Individuals and groups develop belief, practice, and sensibility freely. Some experiment and innovate, others seek to install an “eternal” or “timeless” religious vision onto a far western landscape unburdened by history.

The same open religious environment that is congenial to religious-seeking forces the question of religious identity and belonging to the front of consciousness. The other side of the openness that
supports unfettered, personalized religious quests is the glaring absence of a readily recognizable container for religious aspirations and expression. Everyone who enters the region is confronted with a set of tasks that involve clarifying the meaning of their own religious identity and practice, constructing webs of social relationships, and making sense of the place itself. Here, religious identity and belonging are an individual’s life-long project. Religion takes work, and the spiritual taming of self or society is no less fraught with difficulty than was the conquest of the land and forests and indigenous peoples. It is no accident, then, that in the Portland metro area the question of boundaries—physical, social, cultural, human, religious, and spiritual—rarely are resolved.

The area’s open religious environment must not be confused with an empty environment, however. Multiple forms of religious organization, stable and emergent, old and new, have co-existed in the region, albeit sometimes in balkanized, geographic isolation. The Portland metro area has long been home to Jewish synagogues, Catholic parishes, congregations of historic Protestant denominations, and historically African-American churches. From their first appearance on the U.S. scene, Holiness and Pentecostal Christians have had better traction in the Pacific Northwest than in other regions outside of the South.

Today, the Portland metro area has more mega churches (congregations that regularly worship more than 2,000 weekly) than much more highly churched states like Alabama. Metro’s suburban mega churches not only respond to the needs of primarily in-migrants to the region, they continue a century-long tradition of building large, gathering many, and offering powerful, visceral experiences of the divine. Muslim, Buddhist, Russian Pentecostal and Hispanic Catholic immigrant communities continue a century-plus tradition of establishing religious-ethnic communities in the area. The Center for Spiritual Development at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral carries on in a newer form the historic Protestant denominations’ longstanding work of bridging individual religious quests to concern for the broader public or common good.

The Portland metro area also is a center for

As church attendance has fallen, many church buildings have been converted to other uses. This former church and Masonic lodge in southeast Portland is now home to the Mazamas, a Portland-based mountain climbing organization.
Wicca and other earth-based spirituality movements, and the site of the Annual Northwest Fall Equinox Festival. Businesses like the Renaissance Bookstore in Northwest Portland have long served a clientele pursuing eclectic personal spiritual quests. Organizations such as the Living Enrichment Center in Wilsonville, Oregon, offer companionship on the “new spirituality” journey. Environmentalists, animal rights activities, and atheists articulate their causes in languages of meaning, larger-than-human contest, and purposefulness that resonate as “religious.”

Whatever their form, both older, well-established and newer, emergent forms of religious organization must contend with the Portland metro area’s open, fluid religious environment. In order to maintain themselves, all must appeal to individuals’ personal spiritual aspirations and offer a vision and experience of community that individuals will find compelling. Relevance, not habit or heritage, is the glue of religious adherence in the Pacific Northwest, and always has been.

Further, because so few people are in religious organizations, and no single denomination or cluster of denominations, with the exception of Catholics in Multnomah county, is large enough to claim even 8% of the population, religious perspectives garner weight in debate over issues of public concern through formal alliances or affinity. Consequently, shifts in the configuration of the minority of the population within religious organizations have contributed to religion’s greater visibility and contested role in the metro area.

**A Reconfigured Religious Landscape and Its Consequences**

From 1970 to 2000 the population of Clackamas, Clark, Columbia, Multnomah, Washington, and Yamhill counties grew from 1,076,133 to 3,185,403, a 192% increase.
Multnomah County’s biggest city, also is the site of renewed commitment and innovation among historic Protestant churches, and has the largest African American and Jewish populations among the six counties. Another factor may be the relatively slow growth in population in Multnomah County during this period. Clark remained stable, while Clackamas, Columbia, Washington, and Yamhill all saw decreases in the percentage of their populations claimed by religious organizations. The decreases occurred in the face of population increases of over 100% in Clackamas, Washington, and Yamhill, and over 50% in Columbia.

While the metro area’s overall adherence level remained in the mid-30% range from 1970-2000, the relative size of the slices of the adherent pie changed significantly. The Catholic Church remains the single largest denomination in all six counties, as it was in 1970. However, its slice of the adherent pie grew only in Multnomah County, where it makes up over 42% of all adherents and nearly 23% of the population. In each of the other counties, Catholics comprise less than 10% of the population. The Catholic Church’s share of the adherent pie remained steady in Clark County, and fell by half or more in the remaining four counties.
Across all six counties the historic “mainline” Protestant denominations now have thinner slices of the adherent pie than they had in 1970. Lutherans, Methodists, and Presbyterians retain the strongest presence, though no one of them has even 2% of the population of any of the six counties. They do, however, retain some affective allegiance from of the majority of people in the area who identify with a religious body but do not participate in a religious organization of that group. When combined, the historic Protestant denominations in size are equal to or slightly larger than the Holiness/Wesleyan/Pentecostal family in each of the six counties.

Multnomah County is the only one with a significant presence of Jews. In no other county do they claim 1% of the population, though they are present in Clackamas, Clark and Washington. Historically African American Churches make up 4% of the population and 7.4% of the adherents in Multnomah County. Among the other counties only in Clark do they have more than 1% of the population.

Latter-Day Saints (Mormons) have grown significantly in the region over the past three decades. They now are the second largest denomination in all the counties of the Portland metro area except for Multnomah where they rank third behind Catholics and Jews.

Pentecostal denominations have grown significantly in all six counties. Beaverton Four Square, a Pentecostal congregation, is the largest of the metro area’s mega churches. As a group, Holiness/Wesleyan/Pentecostal bodies capture 4-to-6% of the population in each of the six counties. Pentecostalism always has had a stronger presence in the area than in other regions of the country outside the South. Its portable theology of the Spirit’s presence and its worship – which evokes a visceral experience of the divine – have proved amenable to a mobile, questing people, both those who come into the region and those already here.

The area also has seen an increase in independent, non-denominational groups. These groups are characterized by a sophisticated facility with media, contemporary worship, “conservative” social values, and a traditional Protestant evangelical theology. Sociologist Donald Miller refers to this movement as “primitive postmodern” Christianity; “primitive” because they teach a version of Christianity in which biblical teachings are literally real, and “postmodern” because of their command of media technology and flattened organizational structure that resembles businesses in the knowledge economy.

Cumulatively the shifts in the adherent pie show the growth of religious groups that, historically, have been more sectarian in orientation and separate from the public square. In the past 30 years they have become more active politically. They bring to that activity a way of construing the relationship between personal religious convictions and the responsibilities of citizens in the public square that differs from the construal more familiar to those shaped by historic Protestant churches.

The growth of Pentecostal churches and other conservative Christians in the area, coupled with the decline in the numbers of historic mainline Protestants, helps to explain the metro area’s heightened religious tension. The relatively congenial alliance of the churched (primarily historic Protestant mainline and Catholic) and un-churched that provided the area its public persona during the middle third of the twentieth century has been unraveling. It is not yet clear what will emerge in its place.

At the moment the area has two growing centers of religious gravity. One is spiritual environmentalism, to which many un-churched as well as liberal and moderate Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, as well as many Buddhists, atheists, and spiritual seekers are committed. The other is a socially conservative, theologically traditional, entrepreneurial Protestant evangelicalism. The former, according to sociologist Mark Shibley, has for some time served as the dominant religious reference group of the region. The latter, according to religionist James Wellman, is intent on claiming that role. The physical, social, and religious future of the area depends, in part, on whether a discourse useful for framing issues of public concern, and intelligible to both groups, emerges. Without a discourse that can bridge personal spiritual quests—Pentecostal, PETA, or EarthFirst!—to questions of the larger human and more than human common good, the dreams of a good life held by people inside and outside the doors of religious organizations in the metroscape will come to naught.

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