

Secular Spiritual “Nones”: Investigating Religiously Unaffiliated Spirituality in Cascadia

Introduction

Traditional religion has failed to dominate the population of Cascadia for two hundred years. However, an alternative earth-based spirituality has flourished here, distinguishing this region from the rest of North America and possibly the world. This region is home to a majority “unchurched” population of religious “nones” (those who when asked what their religion is, would say “none”) that is twice the size of the largest religious denomination, comprising one quarter of the populations of Oregon and Washington and one third of British Columbians. Furthermore, this population is continuing to grow with younger generations identifying as religiously unaffiliated. Scholars investigating Cascadia’s religious “nones” have found within this population groups of apocalyptic millennialism (primarily on the U.S. side of the border) as well as different expressions of New Age spiritualities and an earth-based spirituality. For many Cascadians, nature is revered and experienced as sacred. This is the essence of earth-based spirituality, the most prominent form of spirituality in the Pacific Northwest.

The Growth of Religious “Nones” in Canada, the U.S.A. and Cascadia

Prior to 1971, less than 1 percent of the Canadian population reported having no religion, but by 2011, approximately 23.9 percent of the Canadian population reportedly had no religion, representing a portion of Canada’s population 2.5 times larger than the combined total of those reporting as Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Sikh, and Hindu, with no indication that the rate of growth for this population is subsiding. In the province of British Columbia, nearly half of the population indicated they had “no religion” in 2011; this is true for more than half of those in the city of Victoria.

Similarly, this trend is seen in the U.S.A. (though to a lesser extent) with religious “nones” being concentrated in the Pacific Northwestern states of Washington and Oregon. This region has always been dominated by an “unchurched” or religiously unaffiliated population, with its religious adherence rate reaching only 34.4 percent in 1970 – the United States as a nation reached this percentage in 1890. According to the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) 2008, “nones” increased from 8.1 percent of the U.S. population in 1990 to 15 percent in 2008 (jumping from 14 to 34 million); 22 percent of Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 self reported as “nones.” In comparison, one quarter of the population in Washington and Oregon identified this way.



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What Difference Does the Border Make? Cascadian Spirituality in Canada and the USA

While Cascadia is imagined as having a unified regional identity, the presence of the border defines some notable challenges to the cohesiveness of this region, with various differences appearing on both the Canadian and American sides. The separation of British Columbia and Washington via the forty-ninth parallel bifurcates the communities of Coast Salish and Interior Salish indigenous peoples, creating practical and conceptual boundaries for these populations to overcome. Furthermore, while both sides of the border are home to large populations of religious “nones,” the cultural acceptability and religious responses to this are not equal. Cultural circumstances suggest that millennial religious “nones” in Canada, especially in British Columbia, are likely more religiously illiterate than their American counterparts, and experience less backlash for being so, given the relatively open and inclusive religious environment and national value of multiculturalism. The lack of a dominant religious group in the United States has provided room for the rise of an apocalyptic millennialism, a trend that is significantly less prominent on the Canadian side of the border. Moreover, the evangelical Christian communities that have also developed in the absence of a dominant religious reference group, are larger in numbers in Washington and Oregon where they have been actively involved in sectarian entrepreneurship to recruit religious ‘identifiers’ back to the church. Meanwhile, Vancouver’s evangelical population has been more assertive in educational settings at Regent College and Trinity Western University.

Expressions of Secular Spirituality in Cascadia

Collectively, the New Age movement and the rise of environmentalism have contributed to the expressions of secular spirituality seen in Cascadia today. New Age spiritualities emerged out of the eclectic practices of ‘spiritual seekers’ in the New Age movement. Ranging from neopaganism, metaphysics, channeling, and “New Spirituality,” these spiritualities are all considered to be centered around a belief that the self is sacred. As such, the orientation of New Age spiritualists is to uncover one’s authentic self, and empower individuals over dominant cultural institutions and the dogma of traditional religions; personal enlightenment is seen as a precursor to societal change. Earth-based spirituality is considered to be the central cultural form of alternative spirituality practiced by religious “nones” in Cascadia. It is expressed in the secular environmental movement, in leisure rituals, indigenous cultural traditions and even official religious institutions. Practitioners of this form of spirituality may nourish their spiritual well-being through recreational activities such as camping, hiking and gardening, or by contributing to environmental organizations and participating in grassroots activism for efforts such as protecting old-growth forests. Overall, Cascadians living amidst the grandeur of the Pacific Northwest’s untainted natural landscapes have developed a closeness with the environment that for most is spiritually meaningful.



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Conclusions

The lack of a dominant traditional religious reference group in Cascadia for the past two hundred years is undoubtedly one of its most distinguishable features, but the deeply personal connection to the environment and the pervasiveness of earth-based spirituality among Cascadians demonstrates the dominance of an alternative religious form. Millennials raised in the 1980s and 90s experienced a context where reverence for nature and protecting the environment became increasingly important values, maintained even at a young age through basic sustainable practices such as recycling in Canada. These experiences have infiltrated the spiritual lives of Cascadian millennials, promoting an earth-based spirituality for which the sacred is not experienced in institutional religious settings, but in nature itself. Upbringings of this nature, alongside the breathtaking landscapes of the Cascadia region, have contributed to an intensity and pervasiveness of earth-based spirituality that is potentially unparalleled in the world.

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