

In the None Zone: Religion in the Pacific Northwest

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [Dec 02, 2008](#) issue

Earlier this year a study conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life concluded that Americans are embracing a “nondogmatic approach to faith.” Pew’s “Religious Landscape Survey” noted that religious believers increasingly have an accepting attitude toward other faiths and different ways of interpreting their own faith.

Given these trends, what will American religious life be like in another generation?

For some scholars, the Pacific Northwest provides a preview. The region is sometimes called the None Zone, based on the fact that in a 2001 poll (the American Religious Identification Survey) 63 percent of Northwesterners said that they were not affiliated with a religious group—compared to 41 percent of Americans as a whole who made that statement. And 25 percent of Northwesterners claimed to have no religious identity—compared to a national figure of 14 percent.

By checking “none” on a survey, however, Northwesterners are not necessarily signaling a lack of interest in religion or religious activities. They are indicating, says Patricia Killen, a historian and dean of Pacific Lutheran University, that they do not think “religious identity is connected to a historic religious institution or faith.” In other words, Northwesterners are in the process of redefining what it means to be religious.

“From 1648 to 1970, we had essentially one idea of what it means to be religious in the Western world,” said Killen. “To be religious was to be engaged with a religious institution. Now, and especially in the Pacific Northwest, people are seeking different, more individualistic and more fluid ways of being religious.”

Spiritual practices, Killen said, are as common in the Northwest as anywhere. And these practices are not only personal and private. People are linked through retreat centers, nonprofit organizations and foundations. Nevertheless, people in the

Northwest are seeking a “direct, portable, visceral experience of God,” and in that search they are more likely to claim a spiritual practice than a religious identity.

Even the religious identity that some do claim is fluid. Every year Killen meets students in her classes at Pacific Lutheran who call themselves “Lu-Bus” or Lutheran-Buddhists. She finds that her students are looking for a “limited liability religious practice,” one that allows them to be “spiritual” without getting caught up in an institution.

There may be some historical reasons for the Northwest’s particular religious profile. Waves of diverse migration brought all kinds of people to the region, and these immigrants were not, on the whole, trying to re-create a past, as were settlers in the Northeast. They were trying to create a future. That mentality has lingered.

“People throw their religious traditions out the window when they cross the Cascades,” commented James Wellman, professor of religion at the University of Washington. “Northwesterners feel considerably less obligated to church than their counterparts in the South or Midwest.” They are far more likely to be motivated by opportunity and possibility than by duty. Since people in this region are not inclined to think of churchgoing as a virtue, they tend to find other things to do on Sunday morning. Therefore churches possess little inherent social capital.

Also, because the area is made up of so many transplants, ties to social institutions are weak. Every time a person moves, she severs social ties, and the more times she moves, the fewer ties she has to sever.

When Wellman looks out over this religious landscape, he sees not so much the American religious style of the future as an open religious market. And the open market makes the region much more hospitable to evangelicals than it might at first appear. Though one might think liberal or mainline church traditions would flourish in the Northwest, Wellman thinks it will be the evangelicals who thrive.

Mainliners look out on the broader culture, Wellman said, and see values that reflect their own. A concern for social justice and the environment is just as important to those who don’t go to church as to those who do. Evangelicals, on the other hand, perceive a culture that is hostile to them, and so they are more motivated to engage in mission. Evangelicals invest in youth programs and build big sanctuaries.

“Evangelicals share the entrepreneurial spirit of the place,” said Wellman. “They take nothing for granted. They see opportunity everywhere.”

The rising strength of evangelicals is already apparent, Wellman thinks. The 2008 Pew study found that close to 33 percent of people in the Pacific Northwest attend religious services regularly—up from 25 percent in 2001—which means the region is getting closer to the national average (39 percent). Wellman thinks those numbers reflect evangelical growth.

The civic and religious culture of the Northwest has been shaped by alliances. Because no one religious group is dominant, it is only by forming alliances that groups can influence social and political life. Killen points to the organized protests at the 1999 meeting of the World Trade Organization as an example: they were the result of powerful alliances between the so-called Nones and mainstream congregations.

It was alliance-building that brought the Dalai Lama to Seattle earlier this year. Dan Kranzler, a wealthy businessperson (“religion follows the economy,” Killen noted), invited the Dalai Lama through his private foundation, the Kirilin Charitable Foundation, which has sought partnerships with religious organizations and businesses.

According to Killen, the historic mainline groups—Catholics, Jews and mainline Protestants—have a tradition of joining in public witness. Each of these groups has a strong conception of the common good. Muslims and Buddhists in the region also fit in with this tradition in many ways—Muslims lead in interfaith work, and it was Buddhists who first organized a community memorial service after the attacks of September 11, 2001. Evangelicals, on the other hand, Killen observes, are less likely to get involved in projects for the common good, spending their energies instead on building their congregations and ministries.

Alliances and networks are not easy to maintain in the Northwest. Changes in leadership and the overall fluid nature of the religious culture can undermine them. If Catholics realign with evangelicals on social issues like abortion and gay marriage, it will make life difficult for Jews and mainline Protestants who have formed important coalitions with Catholics on social welfare projects. By themselves mainline Protestants and Jews are not strong enough to move a “common good” agenda forward.

One of Killen’s concerns is that as people abandon religious institutions in favor of private and individual spiritual practice, religious wisdom will not be passed on. And

she wonders about spiritual maturity. “You can’t be a grown-up in any tradition until you can endure frustration, negotiate conflict and get to the other side of disillusionment with the capacity to hope. We don’t know yet whether the new syncretism will slow down or accelerate this maturation process.”

The biggest challenge for mainline churches is dealing with the tentative nature of people’s commitments. One pastor told Killen, “It takes forever to get people in the door. If they stay, it takes people forever to be committed enough to become members. And then people will leave for any reason—a reason like preferring a 9 a.m. service to a 10 a.m. service.” The pattern of reaching new churchgoers, Killen said, drawing on a fishing metaphor, is “catch and release.” People will wander into a sanctuary or adult education program, but few will stay.

Killen had some advice for church leaders in the region: Don’t let others (including the denomination leaders “back East”) define what it means to thrive, since a thriving religious community in the Pacific Northwest will likely exist on a small scale. Integrity and authenticity matter more than any inherited office or formal title, and people want to know what God and any church has to do with their neighborhood and their everyday life.