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PAUL BRAMADAT (University of Victoria)

Religion, Spirituality, and Secularity in the  
Pacific Northwest: Major Themes

Max Planck Institute for the Study of  
Religious and Ethnic Diversity

*Max-Planck-Institut zur Erforschung multireligiöser  
und multiethnischer Gesellschaften*



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Max-Planck-Institut zur Erforschung multireligiöser und multiethnischer Gesellschaften,  
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## Abstract

The configuration of religion, spirituality, and secularity characteristic of the Pacific Northwest region of North America (Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia) strikes many people as quite peculiar. In particular, the states and province that comprise “Cascadia” are associated with very low levels of religiosity when compared to the other states and provinces in the US and Canada. Although Cascadia is home to rapidly expanding Sikh, Buddhist, and Hindu communities, thriving yoga and new age sub-cultures, evangelical “mega-churches”, and a resurgence in Indigenous culture and spirituality, one might nonetheless say that it is the most secular region in North America. Initially my colleagues and I sought to address the social implications of the processes of secularization unfolding in the Pacific Northwest; the differences between the Canadian and US “sides” of this bioregion; and the barriers that might exist for traditional and usually conservative believers living in a post-institutional liberal environment. While these three considerations inform this project as a whole, each author also deals with empirical and theoretical issues related to their own academic interests, and with matters (such as the concerns of Indigenous Americans and Canadians) that became more central considerations during fieldwork. In this introductory chapter, I explain the theoretical and empirical context for our study. An additional Working Paper related to “reverential naturalism” articulates a novel addition to the theoretical tools normally used to assess religion and irreligion in western liberal democracies.

**Keywords:** Yoga, religion, spirituality, Canada, Pacific Northwest, urban studies, Vancouver

## Author

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## Preface

This Working Paper will eventually be the first chapter in a book I am co-editing with US historian of religion Patricia O’Connell Killen, and sociologist of religion Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme. The project is supported by a grant from Canada’s Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. The book will feature contributions from Canadian and American historians, anthropologists, quantitative and qualitative sociologists, religious studies scholars, and theologians. I spent most of my research leave at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Göttingen working on this larger project. I would like to thank the many colleagues I met in Germany who provided useful feedback on the ideas expressed here. I would be grateful for further responses to this work.

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For decades, the British Columbia government had used “Beautiful British Columbia” and “Super, Natural British Columbia” on license plates, T-shirts, and letterhead. However, in 2007, the government registered a new logo, and announced that the province would also be known as “The Best Place on Earth.”



Although the phrase might strike some readers as an example of hubris, it did nonetheless capture a common impression among many residents of Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia, a region sometimes called the “Pacific Northwest” or “Cascadia.” The region’s dense forests, abundant wildlife, rugged coast, soaring mountains, and mild climate seem

to call for superlatives. Its urban environments are also well-known for their robust economies, cosmopolitanism, and quirky “you do you” openness.<sup>1</sup> When “The Best Place on Earth” began to appear on car licences in British Columbia, one could almost hear the sighs from across the country, and even from more modest residents. Not everyone thought the branding exercise was in poor taste: between 2007 and 2011, almost 200,000 of my neighbours paid an additional fee to trumpet their province’s pre-eminence.<sup>2</sup>

The relaxed ethos, beauty, and verdant environment of Cascadia also drew my small family to “the garden city” of Victoria on Vancouver Island (a 90-minute ferry trip southwest of the city of Vancouver) in 2008. We had driven 2400 kilometres (about 1500 miles) from virtually the centre of the continent to a large island off the far west coast of the continent, from one of the most inhospitable urban climates on the planet (Winnipeg, Manitoba) to one of the most enviable ones. When we arrived, we understood immediately that we had entered a very distinctive terrain. While I had visited the region many times, and had read about the society and culture that emerged out of two centuries of contact between Indigenous peoples, European settlers and more recent newcomers from all over the world, there was something strange about this place that, initially, I could not quite name. Over more than a decade as I have travelled throughout Cascadia and immersed myself in the existing academic literature on its character, some of its mysteries have remained, even as I have felt more and more at home.<sup>3</sup>

The configuration of religion, spirituality, and secularity characteristic of the Cascadian landscape struck me as especially peculiar. In particular, the states and province that comprise the Pacific Northwest are associated with very low levels of religiosity

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- 1 This consensus is clearly conveyed in the popular TV comedy (2011-2018), “Portlandia,” which plays on stereotypes about the hipsters, hippies, hackers and slackers who help to “keep Portland weird” (Samson 2011: 98); the nick-name “Vansterdam” to connote Vancouver’s relatively open approach to sex and drugs; the nick-name “Emerald City” that refers not just to Seattle’s forests and waterways but also its kinship with the mythical land of Oz; and the “best coast” and “left coast” catchphrases sometimes applied to the region.
  - 2 The provincial population is approximately 4.8 million. According to a representative of the British Columbia Insurance Corporation, the plates were available between 2007-2011, and cost \$35 to purchase, and then an additional \$25 each year to retain. A driver who chose these plates and licensed a vehicle for ten years would therefore spend approximately \$285 (Mackin 2011).
  - 3 It is also important to observe that Cascadia is home to dark portents such as the Oregon militia, the wide-spread practices of fish farming and clear-cutting forests, devastating forest fires during most summers, pockets of vaccine rejection and hesitancy, extremely expensive housing in the two largest cities (Seattle and Vancouver), a long history of racism in housing and labour, and entrenched drug and homelessness crises in several of the cities (most alarmingly in the “downtown east side” of Vancouver).

(measured in a range of ways discussed by Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme and Mark Silk in this volume) when compared to the other states and provinces in the US and Canada. So, although the region is home to rapidly expanding Sikh, Buddhist, and Hindu communities, thriving yoga and new age sub-cultures, evangelical “mega-churches”, and a resurgence in Indigenous culture and spirituality, one might nonetheless say that the region is also “The Most Secular Place on Earth,” or at least in North America. As my colleagues and I demonstrate in this book, the truth is that the region’s secularity, spirituality, and openness, are complicated and sometimes counter-intuitive.

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Cascadia has been imagined as distinct for a very long time by settlers and deeply-rooted Indigenous peoples. Consider the following two passages, separated by about 125 years. As the foundations of the new campus of the University of Washington were being built in the 1890s, Adell Parker, then president of the alumni association, intoned:

That the West should unfalteringly follow the East [of North America] in fashions and ideals would be as false and fatal as that America should obey the standards of Europe. Let the West, daring and unprejudiced, discover its own ideals and follow them. The American standard in literature and philosophy has long been fixed by the remote East. Something wild and free, something robust and full will come out of the West and be recognized in the final American type. Under the shadow of those great mountains a distinct personality shall arise, it shall adopt other fashions, create new ideals, and generations shall justify them (“With Due Formality.” *Seattle Telegraph*, July 5, 1894).

Parker articulates a regional identity for elite members of settler society in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Washington. In it one can detect both a familiar trope of the region’s uniqueness as well as the notion that the land was ostensibly *terra nullius* – as though Indigenous peoples and societies were not already well established when large numbers of European settlers began to arrive in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

The second passage is a more recent effort by the Cascadia Institute to define the region using the words and images of David McCloskey (2015), the founder of the institute and the creator of the widely-circulated map of the bioregion (see below).

The purpose of this map is to help ground people more deeply in the life of the wider place. McCloskey’s new Master Map of Cascadia shows the natural integrity of Cascadia as a whole bioregion. Cascadia is named for the whitewaters [*sic*] pouring down the slopes of her mountains. Home of salmon & rivers, mountains & forests, Cascadia rises as a

Great Green Land from the NE Pacific Rim. Cascadia curves from coast to crest – from the Pacific Ocean on the west, to the Rocky Mountains and Continental Divide on the east. On the seafloor Cascadia ranges from the Mendocino Fracture Zone on the south, to the Aleutian Trench in the corner of the Gulf of Alaska on the north....

This new small blue and green map of Cascadia.... shows *a real place, not an abstract nor ideal space*. The life of our bioregion has been obscured, split up by boundaries and separated into categories, the matrix disremembered. *This map reveals something important that has long remained invisible – namely, the integrality of the bioregion we are calling “Cascadia.” This map provides a portrait of home.* (<http://cascadia-institute.org/>; emphasis added)

In both passages, readers will observe the passionate, wistful rhetoric, meant not merely to situate the region on an existing map, but to convey what one might call the *geist*, the spirit of the place that exists in time and space but also, perhaps most profoundly, in shared stories. The emphasis in the second passage on water – both cascading down mountains and covering ancient submerged topographies – evokes the scale and majesty of the region.

Cascadia is sometimes identified with the political borders of states, provinces and countries; others imagine the region in utopian or dystopian ways; some visions of the Pacific Northwest emerge from traditional Indigenous resource use and kinship systems; and some perspectives are characterized by industrial-scale resource extraction and trade patterns. The Pacific Northwest is a palimpsest: simultaneously material, imaginary, political, metaphorical, and mysterious, often resisting human efforts to control or contain it. This was expressed well during our fieldwork in the summer of 2018 when focus group participants in Seattle were asked to define what (or where) Cascadia was. Alluding to the way sockeye salmon shape the region’s environmental history, Andrew replied to our question: “I will defer to the fish.” His modest definition simultaneously expressed an *empirical* reality, since fish cannot travel upstream beyond the mountains that mark the boundary of the watershed; a *cultural* reality of the importance of salmon within the region (Crawford O’Brien 2014); and, even perhaps a *spiritual* reality or attitude of what I think of as “reverential naturalism” (see Chapter Twelve). The multiple ways of delineating and thinking about the region are in tension but not mutually exclusive, and reflect different ways of conceiving of the region that are also indicative of broader discourses of power, nationalism, capitalism, secularism, and the meaning of land. Our task is to look seriously at the ways these forces interact in this region.

At the outset, we should reflect on the common English names for the region. For the sake of convenience, in this book we sometimes use Pacific Northwest and Cascadia as though they are synonymous, although in fact the two terms have slightly different con-



## Cascadia Map 2014

notations. In practice, the term Pacific Northwest tends to be used more descriptively and dispassionately, while Cascadia is generally invoked in reference to what we might consider the affective and imaginative “project” often associated with the region. However, it is valuable to note that although Pacific Northwest is by far the most widely used term

in the academic and public conversations about and within the region, it is technically inaccurate. After all, the vast majority of Canadians in the region actually live in what is, for them, the Pacific *southwest*. Moreover, the American component of the watershed system includes most of Idaho and very small parts of California, Alaska, Montana, Nevada, and Wyoming that are separated from the Pacific Ocean by areas that are not obviously influenced by what many people would think of as the culture, aesthetics, and ecology of the Pacific Northwest. Actually, the terms Pacific Northwest and Cascadia are often associated simply with the entire states of Oregon and Washington and the province of British Columbia; that practice itself is also somewhat arbitrary since parts of southern Oregon and most of northeastern British Columbia are not part of the larger watershed that most commentators associate with the bio-region. Nonetheless, while the editors and authors of this book acknowledge the ambiguities of these terms, we generally use as our analytical frame of reference for the region the areas of the watershed that fall within the borders of these two states and one province.

Maps, of course, do not tell the whole story. It is by now virtually a truism that “the map is not the territory it represents” (Korzybski 1933); the land to which people and stories become attached is rarely captured definitively by national, state, county, or city borders.<sup>4</sup> Cascadia exemplifies what Edward Said (1978) called an “imagined geography” and what Benedict Anderson (1983) would have described as an “imagined community,” a place and a people not simply discovered as distinct, but constructed as distinct by its residents and visitors. For Said, territories and regions emerge discursively as products of political and cultural forces. For Andersen, nations (and other human communities) arise when individuals who would otherwise appreciate their heterogeneity come to feel as though they are members of an indivisible group. The *feeling* is crucial; even though obviously not every Russian, African American, Muslim, or Pacific Northwesterner is equally attached to or defined by their respective imagined communities and the geographies to which these acts of imagination are attached, these human communities are well defined by affectively rich narratives of belonging.

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4 The first map in this chapter was created by David McCloskey in 2015. See: [http://www.cascadia-institute.org/map\\_specifications.html](http://www.cascadia-institute.org/map_specifications.html). I am awaiting formal permission to use his map in the chapter/book. As far as the second one (that appears later) is concerned, the writers include the following note: “This work is free and may be used by anyone for any purpose. If you wish to use this content, you do not need to request permission as long as you follow any licensing requirements mentioned on this page.” The licensing information is CCBY-SA 4.0. The author is listed as Lauren Tierney, and the title of the image is Projection: US National Atlas Equal Area Sources: Commission for Environmental Cooperation, Natural Earth, QGIS [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cascadia\\_\(bioregion\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cascadia_(bioregion))

To the extent that we can consider people in the Pacific Northwest to belong to something like a Cascadian imagined community, its members are bound not by common class, ethnic, or even national narratives, but rather a common story about their relationship to one another and – perhaps principally – to the natural environment in which they are embedded. However, geography is not destiny; all acts of geographical imagination occur against the backdrop of political and historical factors. In this book we are interested in the ways religion, irreligion, and spirituality are imagined within a region that is both a particular *space* (i.e., with certain objective physical features) and a storied *place* (i.e., with the memories, meanings, and values individuals and communities inscribe into spaces as they inhabit them).

In what remains of this chapter, I discuss the project's methodology, the social processes readers might bear in mind when thinking about Cascadia, and the key claims in the chapters that follow.

## Project Design

I am grateful that after over a decade of reflecting upon the particularities of this place, I have encountered peers who share my appetite for a consideration of the region's religious, spiritual, and secular landscape that updates and extends the existing studies (esp. Killen and Silk 2004; Todd 2008). I used this opportunity to bring together an interdisciplinary team of US and Canadian scholars to approach three key research themes: the social implications of the processes of secularization unfolding in the region; the differences between the Canadian and US "sides" of this bio-region; and the barriers that might exist for traditional and usually conservative believers living in a post-institutional liberal environment. While these three considerations inform this project as a whole, each author also deals with empirical and theoretical issues related to their own academic interests, and with matters (such as the concerns of Indigenous Americans and Canadians) that became more central considerations during fieldwork.

The whole team met in Victoria in 2017 and roughly a year and a half later in Seattle to discuss a broad set of themes, and also to share and critique draft chapters, data sources, and approaches. In order to address our three fundamental and many emergent questions, we combined research methods commonly found in the fields of religious studies, sociology, history, and anthropology. We began by conducting a major *literature review* of the existing theoretical and empirical research on religion, irreligion and spirituality

in the region. This review was augmented throughout the project. Related to this, we also compiled an *archive* of historical materials (studies from and about religious groups, newspaper reports about religion and also by religious groups, public policies related to immigration and diversity, etc.).

These forms of data helped to shape the *Pacific Northwest Social Survey* (PNSS), led by Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme and the University of Waterloo's Survey Research Centre. The PNSS was administered online from mid-September to mid-October 2017, with 54 questions on respondent's sociodemographic characteristics, religious, irreligious, and spiritual affiliations, beliefs and practices, friendship networks as well as social and inclusivity attitudes (Wilkins-Laflamme 2018).<sup>5</sup> This data was collected from 1,510 adult respondents 19 years or older residing in British Columbia, Washington or Oregon at the time of the survey. Respondents completed a web questionnaire and were recruited through Léger's professional online panel of registered members ([leger360.com](http://leger360.com)). Age, gender and regional quotas were applied during this selection of respondents, and post-stratification weights were also used during the statistical analyses to make this sample representative of the adult Pacific Northwest general population.

In addition, we also benefited from a convenience sample consisting of 841 additional respondents, most of whom were associated with the personal and professional networks of the scholars in the research team. These respondents were contacted through email, social media, posters, and personal interactions, and asked to complete the same survey.<sup>6</sup> We then created two *focus groups* for each of the four featured cities (Victoria, Vancouver, Seattle, Portland). Groups ranged from five to nine participants. In each city, one group consisted of regular (that is, non-clergy) religious adherents, and the other group consisted specifically of religious, spiritual, or irreligious millennials (defined in this study as individuals born between 1987-1996). Each of these 2-hour long focus group discussions occurred in non-religious public spaces (libraries, credit unions, the CSRS, and a co-working facility) between January and June 2018.

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5 The complete PNSS questionnaire can be found in Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme's 2018 report *The Religious, Spiritual, Secular and Social Landscapes of the Pacific Northwest – Part 2*. Available at: <https://uwspace.uwaterloo.ca/handle/10012/13406>. For more extensive background on the PNSS, see this report and <https://www.uvic.ca/research/centres/csrs/>.

6 There were minor alterations to the wording of some of the questions to accommodate the different samples. Most of the statistical analyses in this book exclude this second convenience sample of 841 respondents, in order to make the sample more representative of the general adult population. However, when minority groups in Cascadia are explored in more detail with the survey data, the larger Léger sample is sometimes complemented with more respondents from the convenience sample.

In these four cities, the principal investigator (myself) and research coordinator (Horton) conducted semi-structured *interviews* with religious and community leaders. One co-investigator (Marks) and the research coordinator and research assistant (Horton and Antonazzi) conducted semi-structured *oral history interviews* with families and individuals with relatively long histories in the region. Transcripts from our focus groups, leader interviews, and oral histories reveal strong thematic commonalities that both confirm and expand upon the existing literature, the PNSS, the archive we created, and the personal experiences of many of the team members who are also residents.

Our data combines the scientific rigour of a professional survey, the benefits of careful archival research, and the unique insights that emerge out of often intimate conversations with individuals and groups. The authors of the chapters that follow were free to use this large and novel data pool in their own ways; this common research resource links the chapters in a way that is uncommon in books involving scholars from a variety of academic backgrounds. In the interest of simplicity, when referring to a comment from our interviews and focus groups we identify the speaker (pseudonyms in all cases) and the context in which she or he was speaking (i.e., focus groups with millennials or non-clergy religious adherents, interviews with religious leaders, and oral history interviews). All interviews took place in the first six months of 2018. In an effort to stimulate further research and discussion, anonymized transcripts of these interviews and focus groups will be made available to the public two years after the publication of the book.<sup>7</sup>

I should observe that while our archival work, literature reviews, survey, and other forms of data concern the entire Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia areas, for practical reasons we decided to conduct our interviews and focus groups in the region's four major metropolitan areas – Victoria, Vancouver, Seattle, and Portland – where roughly 85% of the region's residents live.<sup>8</sup> We anticipate that future field research will provide useful insights into the differences between residents of the densely populated corridor on the “western slope” of Cascadia, roughly between Eugene (Oregon) and North Vancouver (British Columbia) and those relatively understudied groups and individuals in other parts of Cascadia.

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7 See the website of the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society at the University of Victoria: <https://www.uvic.ca/research/centres/csrs/>

8 The exception to this pattern is a small number of oral history interviews conducted outside of these four cities.



Projection: US National Atlas Equal Area Sources: Commission for  
Environmental Cooperation, Natural Earth, QGIS  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cascadia\\_\(bioregion\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cascadia_(bioregion))  
Laura Tierney, author (CCBY-SA 4.0)

## Cascadia: Context and Categories

Although our research and previous work demonstrate that the border does make a significant difference in the ways the region is imagined, a fairly identifiable mood, attitude, or orientation has emerged out of 150 years of colonial settlement, economic development, political contestation, and the physical and psychological distance between the Pacific Northwest and the main urban centres of the continent (Albanese 1990; Bunting 1997;

Crawford O'Brien 2014; Dunlap 2004; Eco-Trust 1995; Ferguson and Tamburello 2015; Goodenough 1998; O'Connell 2003; Robbins 2001; Shibley 2011; Valliant 2005). As Andrew Engelson, the Seattle-based editor of *Cascadia Magazine* put it in 2019: "Cascadia really does have a sense of identity you don't find anywhere else in North America.... You don't find much cross-border identity between, say, New England and Quebec. Here, there's a sense of shared culture that I think is unique and worth investigating."<sup>9</sup>

Generally, one can observe four main trajectories of religious development in Cascadia. While these four paths are evident in other regions and societies (Killen and Silk 2004; cf. Bramadat and Koenig 2009; Beaman and Beyer 2008; Beyer and Ramji 2013; Levitt 2007; cf. Silk and Walsh, *Religion by Region Series*; Diana Eck's Pluralism Project: <http://pluralism.org/>; Pew 2012), they interact in distinctive ways in the Pacific Northwest. These four trajectories tell us a great deal about what we might call the "Cascadia consensus," or the almost taken-for-granted culture of the region.

First, although religious monopolies and oligarchies have existed in a number of places in North America, the Pacific Northwest region may have been "born secular" (Marks 2007: 371; cf. Clarke and Macdonald 2017; Thiessen 2015) at least in the sense that the 19th century Anglican, Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Catholic churches never achieved as strong a foothold in the region as elsewhere in Canada and the United States. This might help to explain the relative prominence of Cascadia's "religious nones" (i.e., people who tell pollsters they have "no religion") when compared with other regions in Canada and the United States. To be clear, very few of these would be atheists in the formal sense of believing firmly that there is no God; these are generally, and rather more amorphously, people who for a variety of reasons are not comfortable associating with any formal religious identity or institution.<sup>10</sup>

As readers will observe in Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme's chapter and the two reports she produced for our study, according to the 2011 Canadian National Household Survey, 44% of British Columbians do not identify with any religious tradition, compared with only 20% in the rest of Canada. South of the border in a relatively more religious US, 32% of residents in Washington and Oregon identified as religious nones in the 2014 Pew Religious Landscape Study, compared with 23% for the country as a whole (Pew Religious Landscape Study 2014; Statistics Canada 2017; cf. Killen and Silk 2004; Block 2016;

9 See: <https://thetyee.ca/Mediacheck/2019/03/26/Magazine-Capture-Shared-Culture-Cascadia/>.

10 In the PNSS, only 7% of Canadian participants and 8% of US participants identified as atheists, humanists, or secularists, whereas the vast majority of the "no religion" cohorts indicated they were agnostics, spiritual but not religious, or nothing in particular.

Marks 2016; see also chapters in this volume by Block and Marks, Killen, Silk, Wellman and Corcoran, and Wilkinson, in which these statistics are engaged directly).

In our project's 2017 Pacific Northwest Social Survey, 49% of British Columbians indicated they had no religious affiliation whereas 44% of the US sample made the same claim. While the no religion cohort is growing rapidly throughout Europe and North America, the preponderance of this option in the Cascadia bioregion is quite significant. Although scholars continue to ask questions about exactly what it means for someone to report on a survey that they have no religion (cf. Thiessen 2015; Zuckerman 2015), as the saying goes, these numbers do not mean nothing. The popularity of the "no religion" self-description in the Pacific Northwest is certainly an important indicator of the distinctiveness of the region (cf. Barman 1991; Block 2016; Burkinshaw 2007; Killen 2004; Marks 2016; Todd 2008; Wellman 2002; Zuckerman 2015).<sup>11</sup>

The second trajectory consists of the small and shrinking number of liberal or mainline Christian communities in the region. Although Christianity was never formally established in Cascadia, until the middle of the 20th century its leaders could nonetheless have confidence that they could speak to and be heard by the dominant society or at the very least by their own stable congregations (Block 2010; 2016; Burkinshaw 1995; Clarke and Macdonald 2017; Killen and Silk 2004; Marks 2016; Wellman 2002; Wellman and Corcoran 2013). The decline in these conventional forms of Christianity in this region – especially in the last several decades – is, in fact, one of the more remarkable transitions in North American religious history, and one that continues to intrigue scholars (cf. Block 2016; Killen and Silk 2004; Klassen 2018; Marks 2016; Wellman 2008). Although the declines evident in membership, identification, and participation in most liberal Christian groups on both sides of the border in the past fifty years have produced a clearly discernible "discourse of loss" (Bramadat and Seljak 2009; cf. Clark and Macdonald 2017) in these groups, some of the questions that remain regarding the specific ways the communities have responded to their new position in the region will be explored by Wilkinson, Killen, and Wellman and Corcoran in this volume.

While the relatively high number of nones and the declining strength of mainline Christian denominations in Cascadia attract some media and academic attention, an equally interesting feature of this region is the third trajectory, which is the growth of relatively conservative communities of Christian and non-Christian backgrounds. This is actually the trajectory about which the least is written (Block 2016:172; cf. Thiessen and

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<sup>11</sup> I would like to thank Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme for help with the statistics that appear in this chapter.

Wilkins-Laflamme 2017; Wellman 2008; Wellman, Corcoran and Stockly 2020). On the one hand, both new and traditional forms of Protestantism ranging from evangelicalism to Pentecostalism to fundamentalism have had success at responding to those for whom conventional denominational settings are not appealing; several of these groups are oriented toward millennial Cascadians, which makes the phenomenon quite intriguing since that is also the group among which “no religion” is such a common selection on surveys (Burkinshaw 1995; Pressnell and Henderson 2008; Wellman, Corcoran and Stockly 2020; PNSS 2017). On the other hand, non-Christian groups – especially Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Hindus – have grown markedly (most obviously in the Vancouver and Seattle areas), largely due to immigration; their average age is also lower than the surrounding society. When compared with the dominant ethos of Cascadia, many non-Christian (and non-liberal Christian) religious communities embrace more traditional views with respect to gender roles and sexual ethics, recreational drug use, generational hierarchies, scripture, and individualism; the tensions that sometimes emerge between their own youth and the broader and increasingly liberal culture that typifies the region will be engaged by Rachel Brown in this volume (cf. Beyer and Ramji 2013; Smith and Snell 2009).

Finally, Cascadia has long been home to a fascinating and dynamic array of religious and spiritual forms, which people have arguably been freer to adopt, adapt, or ignore than ever before and possibly than anywhere else. In the fourth trajectory we see an openness to experimentation, usually without any significant concern about the social, personal, familial, or occupational costs of such efforts. As I suggested earlier, in the Pacific Northwest we can see an on-going interest in what we might call religious or spiritual seeking in activities ranging from mindfulness groups in Seattle, to evangelical churches in Vancouver to gurdwaras in Victoria, to Buddhist temples in Portland, to roughly 20 places of worship on the specially-zoned few kilometres of the “highway to heaven” in Richmond, B.C., to yoga centres in virtually every city and town.<sup>12</sup> The point is that it is probably fair to speculate (see chapters by Killen, Bramadat, Wilkins-Laflamme, Block and Marks) that the social costs one might have to pay to adopt an unfamiliar or eclectic religious or spiritual path – or none at all – have probably never been lower than they are now in Cascadia. Indeed, there is a pervasive “you do you” ethos in the region, and in general residents enjoy tacit permission to seek meaning and purpose from a myriad of sources.

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12 Of course, scholars and laypeople alike sometimes cast aspersions on the ways in which people on the west coast adopt – in highly selective and often essentializing manners – aspects of Asian religions, such as mindfulness and the many variants of yoga on offer in the spiritual marketplace (Bramadat 2019; Jain 2014). However, in this book we are not interested in the “authenticity” of religious or spiritual practices.

## A Complex Consensus

Although these four trajectories are probably the most common way to organize the religious, spiritual and irreligious phenomena of the region, three important additional observations must be made. First, throughout this book it will become clear why commentators and residents both point to the centrality of the natural world in the available data about religion and spirituality in the region (Crawford O'Brien 2014; Killen and Silk 2004; Todd 2008; Valliant 2005), and muse about the relationship between increasing attachment to nature and a general loosening of ties to conventional religious forms.<sup>13</sup> Regarding the second possibility, there are studies that situate the dominant story about contemporary religious change (especially secularization) within the context of attitudes toward the natural world and that provide context for the rise of what I call "reverential naturalism" in Chapter Twelve in this volume. The sociologists Fergusson and Tamburullo, for example, argue that:

The resources of an area's land and climate are its natural amenities. Mountains, hills, lakes, beaches, and pleasant weather all contribute to the look and feel of a region. Although they are a part of the physical landscape, natural amenities have profound social impacts on a region. They attract population growth, generate tourism, and increase economic development. (2015: 296; cf. Wellman and Corcoran 2013)

In an interesting exercise, these scholars assign different "natural amenities" scores to all American counties. They find that if you map this scale onto a conventional map, with a few exceptions the counties with the most favourable scores are mostly on the west coast. Then, they determine how natural amenities scores seem to be correlated with each county's level of religiosity, as measured in all of the standard ways. It turns out that the lovelier your county's natural environment, the lower the likelihood that religion will be a strong feature of your community. This is not to suggest simply that residents of these counties have better things to do than to be involved in religious institutions. The other possibility is that in a place and time in which conventional religious institutions are less and less salient or more and more problematized, the natural world itself may be experienced and storied as a site for being religious or spiritual, whatever those categories might mean to people. The approach to the natural world – and to spirituality – that

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13 A great many books have been written on the role of the natural world in the broader Canadian national narrative. One of the classic observations on this interaction was made by W. L. Morton, who noted that the "alternative penetration of the wilderness and return to civilization is the basic rhythm of Canadian life" (1961: 5).

seems characteristic of the region will be addressed in Chapter Twelve, where I suggest that scholars interested in religion in this part of North America may need to account for “reverential naturalism.”

Second, this region was categorically not *terra nullius* when settlers arrived. Indigenous communities have lived here for millennia and have well-established political, legal, aesthetic, cultural, and spiritual traditions that have survived centuries of catastrophic epidemics (such as smallpox, which in places killed up to 90% of the Indigenous population), and mistreatment and misrecognition from the dominant settler societies on both sides of the border (Harris 1997; Diamond 1997; Lutz 2007; Taylor 2007). Among the large number of Indigenous communities in the Pacific Northwest, one often sees creative tension among the forces of syncretism, revitalization, and assimilationist orientations. The “Indigenous fact” of the region is more apparent and politically salient in Canada, where for a variety of reasons (discussed in the chapter by Horton in this volume), these communities now have an unprecedented opportunity to address historical mistreatment and seek a new way forward.

Third, it is also important to note that non-Indigenous ethnic and religious minorities contribute to the success of the region in ways that are rarely acknowledged. In particular, the growth in populations of Asian, African-American, African, Latino, and Middle Eastern minority communities is a harbinger of the future in the region’s urban spaces (with Seattle and Victoria and finally Portland eventually demonstrating this type of diversification). According to 2016 Canadian census data, this diversity is dramatically evident in Vancouver, where over half of the city’s inhabitants belong to what the Canadian government calls the “visible minority” category, with some large suburbs – such as Richmond – consisting of roughly two-thirds visible minority populations.<sup>14</sup>

Today’s rich and generally peaceable expressions of diversity in cities such as Vancouver and Seattle might be featured prominently in branding exercises, but they should not distract us from a dark history. Until the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in Canada and the United States, Asian and other racialized citizens faced bitter discrimination. Consider the Komogata Maru incident in 1914 (named after the ship of the same name) that forced

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14 <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/visible-minorities-now-the-majority-in-5-b-c-cities-1.4375858> In Canada, a “visible minority” is a non-Indigenous person who is “non-Caucasian” in race and “non-white” in colour. In Victoria, about 15% of the population is a visible minority; in Seattle and Portland, the figures would be roughly 30% and 24% respectively. It is important to note that each country uses its own categories to determine visible minority (in Canada) or racial (in the US) identification. The differences make it difficult to compare and contrast the data.

Hindu and Sikh migrants to sail back to Asia even though they had not contravened any laws or policies in their voyage to British Columbia; or the clause in Oregon's constitution that simply banned "negros" and "mulattos" from living in the state altogether until 1926; or the internment of Canadian and American citizens of Japanese descent living near the Pacific coast during World War II (Stanger-Ross and Sugiman 2017); or the expulsion of the Chinese from Seattle and Tacoma in the wake of the U.S. passing the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882; or the discrimination faced by Victoria's Chinese community who had to purchase a separate plot of land to bury their dead (Lai 2005)); or widespread anxieties about the health threat posed by South Asian newcomers across the region (Wallace 2016). These minority communities suffered flagrant racism at the hands of many white neighbours, even though the often-exploited labour of the former was indispensable for the economic success of the latter.

The point is not simply that people suffered in order to facilitate the affluence, stability, and liberalism many identify with the region. Of course, this did happen, but other social and political orders (e.g., the so-called Washington consensus, the European Union, the post-1947 partitioned South Asian continent, the North American Free Trade zone, The United Nations, etc.) also created deep and unresolved grievances. The broader point I would make is that the generally common – not homogenous, of course, but familiar – perspective one finds especially in the urban centres in the western side of the region is and has always been part of a *political* project. To put it another way, there is nothing natural about the ways people speak about the natural and social spheres of the Pacific Northwest. Indigenous, settler, and newcomer Cascadians live within long-term political projects. This is not to say that the outcomes of these politics have been entirely negative, but rather more simply that the consensus we do find here is as much a social construction and artifice of history, politics, and economics as any other well-established narrative (e.g., those related to the emergence of "Christendom," the Muslim "ummah," or the "Middle Ages"). For these reasons, it is understandable that racialized minorities sometimes resent the sepia hue cast on the region's history and epitomized by branding efforts such as the "Best Place on Earth" licence plate campaign. They may well ask: Best place *for whom*, and *since when*?

## Conclusion

On the western slope of the Pacific Northwest region, the temperate climate, stunning natural environment, cosmopolitanism, and strong economy, make this region unusual, or at least different than many other “imagined geographies.” The Pacific Northwest is almost famously secular or post-institutional in the simple sense that conventional religion has less and less public presence and taken for granted influence in the lives of people. Indeed, those of us who have taught in the region as well as elsewhere on the continent can attest to the relatively high number of undergraduate and graduate students in our programs who are not only themselves “nones” or perhaps “spiritual but not religious,” but whose parents and in some cases grandparents were also raised outside of formal religious communities. This would be relatively rare elsewhere in North America. It is therefore not surprising that Cascadia is not only sometimes framed as the best place on earth, but also as the most secular, or post-institutional, place on earth. The superlatives do not tell the whole story, of course. While empirical evidence from the last several decades demonstrates a shift away from institutional religiosity, our data also suggests that only a critical treatment of claims about the Cascadia’s secularity will ensure we understand the full complexity of the social changes in the region.

Although it is always dangerous to offer predictions, our qualitative and quantitative research suggests that Cascadia may be at the leading edge of what is arguably an epoch-making change in the roles of religion and spirituality in contemporary society (see Mark Silk’s chapter in this volume; cf. Brown 2012; Casanova 2006; Chandler 2008; Davie 1994; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Hervieu-Léger 2006; Meyer et al., 1997; Taylor 2007). While the future does not look very promising for many of the larger Christian denominations, there are signs of innovation in other communities and movements in Cascadia that will benefit from additional scrutiny. As well, as I contend in Chapter Twelve, there is evidence here of a reverential approach to the natural world that is not unique to Cascadia but can be seen quite distinctly here perhaps precisely because the dominant ethos has become so definitively identified with post-institutionalism. In the chapters that follow, the focus is on the current state of religion, spirituality, and irreligion in the Pacific Northwest, but there are clear implications in our volume for our broader understanding of the nature and future of religion in a secular era.

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