

*Religion at the Edge*

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# Introduction: Religion, Spirituality, and Irreligion in The Best Place on Earth

PAUL BRAMADAT

The BC government used “Beautiful British Columbia” and “Super, Natural British Columbia” on licence plates, T-shirts, and letterhead for years. However, in 2007, the government registered a new logo and announced that the province would 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” slogan began to appear on licence plates in British Columbia, one could almost hear the sighs from people across the country and even from more modest



FIGURE 1.1 BC licence plate. *The License Plate Shack* ([platesback.com](http://platesback.com))

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 our 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 ninety-minute ferry trip southwest of the city of Vancouver) in 2008. We drove 2,400 kilometres (about 1,500 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 climates on the planet (Winnipeg, Manitoba) to one of the most enviable. When we arrived, we understood 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 had 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 I could not quite name. Over more than a decade, as I travelled throughout Cascadia and immersed myself in the academic literature on its character, some of its mysteries 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 peculiar. In particular, the states and the province that make up the Pacific Northwest are associated with very low levels of religiosity (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 United States and Canada. So, although the region is home to rapidly expanding Sikh, Buddhist, and Hindu communities, thriving yoga and New Age subcultures, evangelical "megachurches," 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 counterintuitive.

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Cascadia has been imagined as distinct for a 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, Adella Parker, president of the alumni association, intoned:

That the West should unflinchingly 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.<sup>4</sup>

Parker articulates a regional identity for elite members of settler society in late nineteenth-century Washington. In it, one can detect both the familiar trope of the region's uniqueness and the notion that the land was *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 nineteenth 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, the founder of the institute and the creator of the widely circulated map of the bioregion (see [Figure I.2](#)):

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 integrity of the bioregion we are calling "Cascadia."* *This map provides a portrait of home.* (Cascadia Institute, n.d., emphasis added)

In both passages, observe the passionate, wistful rhetoric, meant not merely to situate the region on an existing map but also 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;

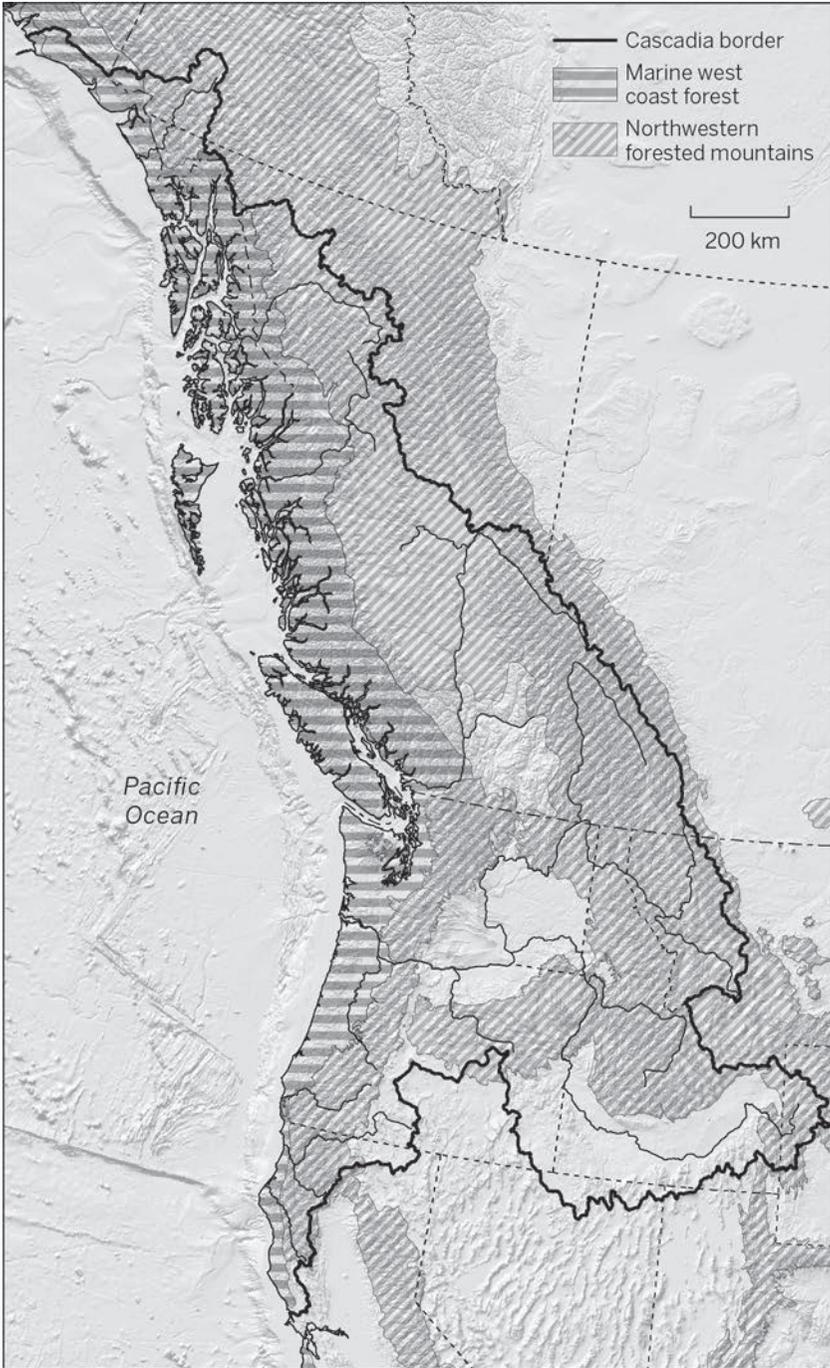


FIGURE 1.2 Cascadia, 2014. By David McCloskey and adapted by Eric Leinberger

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, one that reflects the importance of salmon within the region (Crawford O'Brien 2014); and even, perhaps, a *spiritual* reality or attitude I think of as "reverential naturalism" (see [Chapter 1](#)). These multiple ways of delineating and thinking about the region are in tension but not mutually exclusive and are also indicative of broader discourses of power, nationalism, capitalism, secularism, and the meaning of land. Our task is to look seriously at the way these forces interact in this region.

At the outset, I 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 connotations. 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" associated with the region. However, it is valuable to note that although "Pacific Northwest" is by far the most widely used term in academic and public conversations about and within the region, it is technically inaccurate. After all, most Canadians in the region 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. 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 bioregion. Nonetheless, while we 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. 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 Anderson, 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.

To the extent that we can consider people in the Pacific Northwest as belonging 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, 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 on 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 existing studies (see Killen and Silk 2004; Todd 2008). In this book, an interdisciplinary team of US and Canadian scholars approach three key research themes: the social implications of secularization in the region; 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 the 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 people in the US and Canada) 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. 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.).<sup>5</sup>

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 and included fifty-four questions on respondent's socio-demographic characteristics; religious, irreligious, and spiritual affiliations; beliefs and practices; friendship networks; and social and inclusivity attitudes (Wilkins-Laflamme 2018). This data was collected from 1,510 adult respondents nineteen 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 the selection of respondents, and poststratification weights were used during the statistical analyses to make this sample representative of the adult Pacific Northwest population in general.

In addition, we also benefitted 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 they were 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, and Portland). Groups ranged from five to nine participants. In each city, one group consisted of regular religious adherents (most of whom had no formal training in religion), and the other group consisted specifically of religious, spiritual, or irreligious millennials (defined in this study as individuals born between 1987

and 1996). Each of these two-hour-long focus-group discussions occurred in non-religious public spaces (libraries, credit unions, the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society [CSRS], and a coworking facility).

In these four cities, the principal investigator (myself) and research coordinator (Chelsea Horton) conducted semistructured interviews with religious and community leaders. One coinvestigator (Lynne Marks) and the research coordinator and research assistant (Horton and Taylor Antoniazzi) conducted semistructured 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 on 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 speakers (pseudonyms in all cases) and the context in which they were speaking (i.e., focus groups with millennials or nonclergy religious adherents, interviews with religious leaders, or oral-history interviews). All interviews took place in the first six months of 2018. 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 this book.<sup>7</sup>

I should observe that our archival work, literature reviews, survey, and other forms of data concern all of Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia. However, 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 percent 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. Moreover, because of their small numbers in the region as a whole, African Americans did not feature prominently in our professionally weighted survey or our interviews, but their real and symbolic importance in the region – especially in Cascadia South – became more obvious in the wake of Black Lives Matter protests in and around Seattle and Portland in 2020.

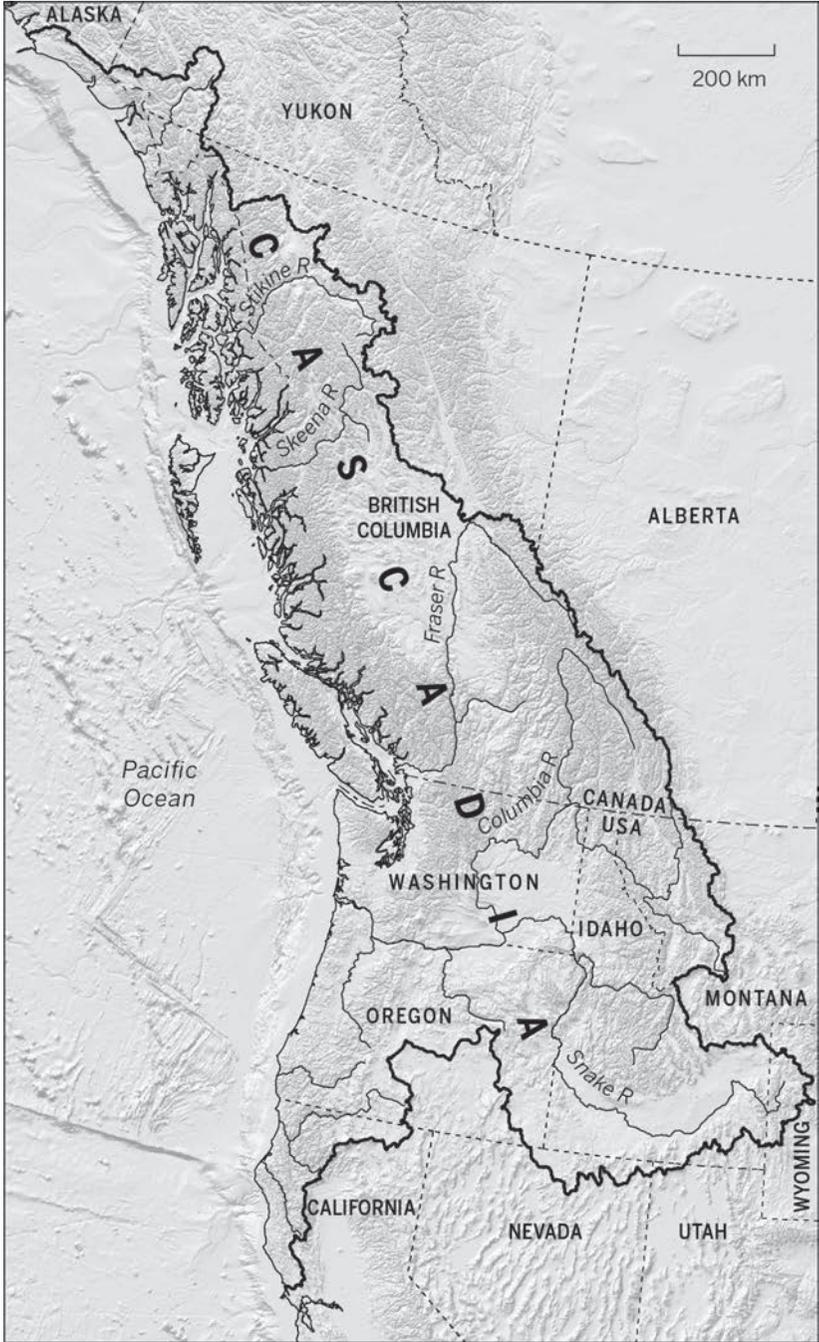


FIGURE 1.3 Cascadia, with borders. *By Lauren Tierney, adapted by Eric Leimberger from original on Wikipedia*

### **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; Ferguson and Tamburello 2015; Goodenough 1998; O'Connell 2003; Robbins 2001; Shibley 2011; Wolf, Mitchell, and Schoonmaker 1995). 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" (Cheung 2019).

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; Bramadat and Koenig 2009; Beaman and Beyer 2008; Beyer and Ramji 2013; Levitt 2007; Diana Eck's Pluralism Project, pluralism.org), they interact in distinctive ways in the Pacific Northwest. These four trajectories tell us a great deal about what I think of as the Cascadia consensus, 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; see also Clarke and Macdonald 2017; Thiessen 2015) at least in the sense that the nineteenth-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 people are atheists in the formal sense of believing firmly that there is no God; they 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>9</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 percent of British Columbians do not identify with any religious tradition, compared with only 20 percent in the rest of Canada. South of the border, in the relatively more religious United States, 32 percent of residents in Washington and Oregon identified as religious Nones in the 2014 Pew Religious Landscape Study, compared with 23 percent for the country as a whole.<sup>10</sup>

In our project's 2017 PNSS, 49 percent of British Columbians indicated they had no religious affiliation, whereas 44 percent 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 (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 (Barman 1996; Block 2016; 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 twentieth 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 (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 discernible "discourse of loss" (Bramadat and Seljak 2009; Clarke 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 Patricia O'Connell Killen ([Chapter 7](#)), James K. Wellman Jr. and Katie Corcoran ([Chapter 8](#)), and Michael Wilkinson ([Chapter 9](#)) in this volume.

While the relatively high number of Nones and the declining strength of mainline Christian denominations in Cascadia have attracted 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 the trajectory about which the least has been written (Block 2016, 172; Thiessen and 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 the needs of 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 whom “no religion” is such a common selection on surveys (Burkinshaw 1995; Pressnell and Henderson 2008; Wellman, Corcoran, and Stockly 2020; Wilkins-Laflamme 2017, 2018; 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, and their average age is lower than the surrounding society. When compared with the dominant ethos of Cascadia, many non-Christian (and nonliberal Christian) religious communities embrace more traditional views on 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 is discussed by Rachel Brown in this volume ([Chapter 10](#)) (Beyer and Ramji 2013; Smith and Snell 2009).

Finally, Cascadia has long been and continues to be home to a fascinating and dynamic array of religious and spiritual forms, which people have arguably been freer to adopt, adapt, or ignore than possibly 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 ongoing 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 twenty places of worship on the specially zoned “highway to heaven” in Richmond, British Columbia, 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, and Block and Marks) that the social costs one might have to pay to adopt an unfamiliar or eclectic religious or spiritual path have probably never been lower – or none at all – than they are now in Cascadia. Indeed, there is a pervasive “you do you” ethos in the region, and residents, in general, enjoy tacit permission to seek meaning and purpose from a myriad of sources.

### **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 alike 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) and muse about the relationship between an increasing attachment to nature and a general

loosening of ties to conventional religious forms.<sup>13</sup> Regarding the second possibility, some studies situate the dominant story about contemporary religious change (especially secularization) within the context of attitudes toward the natural world and that provides context for the rise of what I call “reverential naturalism” in [Chapter 1](#) of this volume. The sociologists Todd Fergusson and Jeffrey Tamburello (2015, 296), 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” (see also 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 spirituality – that seems characteristic of the region will be addressed in [Chapter 1](#), 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 percent of Indigenous populations) 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 by Chelsea 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).<sup>14</sup> According to 2016 Canadian census data, this diversity is dramatically evident in Vancouver, where over half 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 (Carman 2017).<sup>15</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 twentieth 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 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, which is, of course, one of the reasons for the relatively low number of African Americans (and the forms of Protestantism with which they are often associated) in the state and region today and perhaps one of the reasons for the dramatic Black Lives Matter protests in Portland, Oregon, in 2020; or the internment of Canadian and American citizens of Japanese descent living near the Pacific Coast during the Second World War (Stanger-Ross and Sugiman 2017); or the expulsion of the Chinese from Seattle and Tacoma in the wake of the United States 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 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 subcontinent, 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 on the western side of Cascadia is and has always been part of a *political* project. To put it another way, there is nothing natural about the way people speak about the natural and social spheres of the Pacific Northwest. Indigenous, settler, African American, 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?”

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On the western slope of the Pacific Northwest region, the temperate climate, stunning natural environment, cosmopolitanism, and robust economy make for an unusual region, or at least a region different from many other imagined geographies. The Pacific Northwest is almost famously secular or postinstitutional 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 identify as Nones or perhaps “spiritual but not religious” and who have parents and in some cases grandparents who were also raised outside of formal religious communities. This is relatively rare elsewhere in North America. It is therefore not surprising that Cascadia is sometimes framed not only as the best place on earth but also as the most secular, or postinstitutional, 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 suggest that only critical treatment of claims about Cascadia’s secularity will lead to a full understanding of the 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; Brown 2012; Casanova 2006; Chandler 2008; Davie 1994; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Hervieu-Léger 2006; Meyer et al. 1997; Taylor 2007). As Arthur, one of our oral-history participants, put it, “Somebody told [my family] that the Pacific Northwest was the land of tomorrow,” a reflection that says something both

about the past and perhaps the future of the region. While the prospects do 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 1](#), 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 postinstitutionalism. 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.

#### NOTES

- 1 This consensus is clearly conveyed in the popular TV comedy *Portlandia* (2011–18), which plays on stereotypes about the hipsters, hippies, hackers, and slackers who help to “keep Portland weird” (Samson 2011, 98); the nickname “Vansterdam,” which is used to connote Vancouver’s relatively open approach to sex and drugs; the nickname “Emerald City,” that refers not only to Seattle’s forests and waterways but also to its kinship with the mythical land of Oz; and the “best coast” and “Left Coast” catchphrases, which are used to capture the spirit of 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 2007–11 and cost 35 dollars to purchase and an additional 25 dollars a year to retain. A driver who chose these plates and licensed a vehicle for ten years would spend 285 dollars (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 Eastside of Vancouver).
- 4 “With Due Formality,” *Seattle Telegraph*, July 5, 1894.
- 5 See <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 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 Léger sample is sometimes complemented with more respondents from the convenience sample.
- 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.
- 9 In the PNSS, only 7 percent of Canadian participants and 8 percent 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.
- 10 See Killen and Silk (2004), Block (2016), and Marks (2016). See also chapters in this volume by Tina Block and Lynne Marks ([Chapter 4](#)), Mark Silk ([Chapter 6](#)), Patricia O’Connell

- Killen (Chapter 7), James Wellman and Katie Corcoran (Chapter 8), and Michael Wilkinson (Chapter 9), in which these statistics are engaged directly.
- 11 I would like to thank Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme for help with the statistics that appear in this chapter.
  - 12 Of course, scholars and lay people 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 seeking to determine the “authenticity” of religious or spiritual practices.
  - 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 (1961, 5), who noted that the “alternative penetration of the wilderness and return to civilization is the basic rhythm of Canadian life.”
  - 14 Throughout this book, we strive for consistency in the language we use to name the communities we discuss. We are, nonetheless, aware both that US and Canadian societies often use different categories (e.g., “visible minority” in Canada as opposed to “racial minority” in the United States) and that all these categories are subject to flux and may be replaced by new terms (e.g., LatinX, LGBTQI).
  - 15 In Canada, a “visible minority” is a non-Indigenous person who is “non-Caucasian” in race and “nonwhite” in colour. It is important to note that each country uses its own categories to determine visible minority (in Canada) or racial (in the United States) identification. The differences make it difficult to compare and contrast the data.

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