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When 'No Religion' Takes First Place: A Trend?

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The laboratory of secularization has been the advanced nations of Western Europe and North America. These are the nations that gave birth to Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, the Scientific Method, and the Information Age. The secularization theorists argued that as human beings gain control of the universe, unlocked the secrets of the cosmos, and filled time and space with entertainment and cultural riches, God would simply disappear from the nation's life and thinking.

Europe seems to prove the point. As one Danish reporter commented to me, if the King of Denmark ended his speeches with "God bless Denmark," citizens would assume he had become a religious nut. The President of the United States, on the other hand, routinely concludes his speeches with "God bless America." Few Americans see this as evidence of religious extremism.

Indeed, the United States has been the stark exception to the secularization theory. This exceptionalism, shown most clearly in the high rates of church attendance and the public influence of Christianity in the United States, perplexes sociologists and anthropologists, and causes no lack of head-scratching among the academic elite.

Christian believers can take little comfort from many of the statistical reports that claim a very high rate of religious devotion among the American people. Any one deeply involved in church life knows that much of the spirituality claimed by the American people is thin, cultural, and sub-Christian. Many Americans now put together their own cafeteria-style religion, taking bits and pieces from various worldviews and belief systems and combining them in a way that adds "meaning" without making demands upon them.

Something beyond this is also at work.

Major research projects emerging in recent years indicate that America's exceptionalism may be slipping. The clearest evidence for this comes in analysis of the Pacific Northwest. A 2001 religious identification survey undertaken by the City University of New York, found that Oregon ranked No. 1 in terms of residents who choose "no religion" as their religious identification. In four states, "no religion" ranked highest among available options. The other states were Idaho, Washington, and Wyoming. An article by Jeff Wright published in the Eugene, Oregon, Register-Guard, reports: "The number of Americans who claim no religious identity in surveys, dubbed "nones" by experts, has roughly doubled in the past decade, making them possibly the third-largest group in the nation, after Catholics and Baptists."

Further evidence comes from the Glenmary Research Center, which reported in 2002 that several cities located in

Southern Oregon, and Northern California are those “where Americans are least likely to have a religious affiliation.”

These statistics require some further investigation. For one thing, the City University study listed major Christian denominations as individual choices on the survey. Taken together, more participants identified with some form of Christianity than with non-belief. Still, the fact that “no religion” ranked first remains significant.

The Pacific Northwest has long been identified with an independent streak and secular tendencies. Jeff Wright, however, argues that this does not mean that residents are non-religious. “Americans who pick no religion say they believe in God,” reports Wright, “and often pray or meditate—habits not that different from the folks who fill the pews each Sunday.”

Then again, their beliefs are often very different from those involved in organized Christianity. The Register-Guard article tells of Christopher James, a 28 year old Oregonian, whose spirituality is based in nature. “When I get out into nature, immediately I can feel my body chemistry change,” he said. “It is such a physical experience, it affects the rest of me.”

James is one of those who identifies himself as having “no religion.” He works for the non-profit Sustainable Forestry Project, and claims, “I do believe in a higher power. For me, it exists more in the order of the universe and everyday life.” The article also provides interesting glimpses into the various alternative worldviews and spiritualities that fill the vacuum created by Christianity’s absence. Mark Shibley, who teaches sociology of religion at Southern Oregon University, identifies three of these alternatives as nature religion, New Age spirituality, and anti-government millennialism.

Shibley explains that this last option “encompasses survivalism and end-of-the-world scenarios.” Patricia O’Connell Killen of Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, comments: “For many people, the religious institutions out there aren’t affectively addressing what they see as truly significant issues—mainly the environment and how we can and should be a human community.” Killen is editor of forthcoming book entitled, *None Zone*. It should make for interesting reading.

The city of Eugene, Oregon does seem to provide ample evidence for the rise of alternative religious movements and worldviews in the secular terrain of the Pacific Northwest. Bookstores sell more titles related to Buddhism than Christianity, and Larry West, owner of the Book Mark Bookstore, comments, “I think a lot of people feel the way I do, that living a good life, ethical life, is what matters. It is nothing against organized religions, they all have good ideas, they just seem to get perverted too often.”

Some residents are into more bizarre forms of pagan spirituality. Mother Kali’s Bookstore near the campus of the University of Oregon, features titles related to paganism, earth-centered spirituality, environmentalism, and sustainable living.

Clerk Tiffany Hagmark reflected, “God to me is a cell or a tree or a flower. It is carbon-based.” Carbon-based? These studies, along with the report from the Register-Guard, indicate trends that are taking root, not only in the Pacific Northwest, but around most of the major academic and cultural centers of the nation. Bookstores much like “Mother Kali’s” can be found in cities as seemingly conventional as Charlotte, North Carolina, Bloomington, Indiana, and Austin, Texas. These developments, more pronounced in the Northwest than in other parts of the country, are taking root in a generation and segment of the population that is as secular as societies of Western Europe.

These reports also verify the truism that just as nature abhors a vacuum, a society cannot tolerate a spiritual vacuum. Where Christianity is absent, a host of pagan alternatives quickly takes its place. These pagan spiritualities present a formidable challenge to Christian evangelism, precisely because the gospel of Jesus Christ does make demands upon our lifestyle and worldview that run counter to the humanistic focus on the self that is at the center of pagan alternatives.

This secularizing trend may indeed point to the future of the Pacific Northwest and neighboring states. The more pressing question is whether the rest of the nation will follow these same patterns. The difference between true Christianity and the pagan spiritualities of our day must be just as clear to the people of God as the distinction between Israel and the Canaanites in the time of Moses. We are living in a Caanan of our own making.

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