

# On America's Pacific shore, many religious currents meet

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If you like to deal in broad generalizations about American religion, you probably see the north-east as a heartland of liberal or mainline Protestantism, and the South as the home of old-time evangelicals. Certain cities like Chicago and Pittsburgh abound with blue-collar Catholics, and the West coast is...what exactly? In the minds of many people (especially those who don't live there) it is a region where all the cultural and religious straitjackets of places further east have been discarded, and spiritual seekers can dabble in whatever mixture they choose of new-age practices, Buddhism-lite, or no faith at all.

At least this much is true. The three American cities with the highest proportion of religiously unaffiliated residents are all on the Pacific coast: Portland, Oregon (with 42%) followed by Seattle and San Francisco (33% each). But the real story of faith in the American West is more interesting and paradoxical, as a book by Todd Kerstetter, a professor of history at Texas Christian University, shows. As he explains in "Inspiration and Innovation", the Pacific coast has been a place of religious competition at least since the 18th and 19th century when Spanish Catholic missions (pictured, above) and Russian Orthodox ones vied for the souls of the indigenous people.

As the Second World War gave way to the Cold War, he notes, California developed a booming aerospace sector and drew in millions of newcomers whose religious instincts were conservative. But theirs was also a world that revered innovation and technology. This mixture spawned the drive-in church, the megachurch and more recently the online church. Buddhism has certainly been an important influence on the Pacific coast, but not solely the slightly faddish version embraced in bohemian literature and the movie world. Migrants from Japan, China, Vietnam, South Korea and Sri Lanka have been that faith's principal bearers, making Los Angeles the only city in the world where all the main forms of Buddhism flourish.

The net result has been to turn the Pacific coast into a place where rather conservative and traditional forms of religion co-exist and occasionally commingle with new-fangled ones. Where religion is traditionalist in its doctrine, it is innovative in its style. One such case is the Saddleback Church in southern California, founded in 1980 by Pastor Rick Warren, with just one family. It claims to have baptized 42,000 people but it avoided acquiring a permanent building (migrating instead between schools, recreation halls, restaurants and theatres) until its weekly attendance topped 10,000. On the other hand, even when religion is highly experimental and blurs the doctrinal contours, it continues to draw selectively on older texts, teachings and symbols.

Take for example, the branch of the Unity Church (a movement founded in the Midwest in 1889) which has flourished in Seattle since the 1940s and now has a robust congregation of about 250. On a recent Sunday, the minister Karen Lindvig devoted part of her 20-minute sermon to a story about a Nigerian god who used a multi-colored hat to trick his two best friends into a fight; she thus drove home the church's belief in being "open" to a variety of truths. Her movement stresses its commonality with Christian texts and teaching but it rejects the belief that Jesus Christ was in any unique sense the son of God. And in addition to Christian symbolism the Seattle church has altars dedicated to a dozen different religions, including Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism and paganism. When Jewish feast days draw near, Ms Lindvig incorporates Jewish chants in worship or holds a *Seder* dinner; and she marked Fathers' Day by bringing in a shaman, in other words a seeker of prophetic powers through indigenous religious practice. She sees this mixture as an exuberant expression of American religious freedom: "Isn't it great that we live in a country where we can pick what we want to believe?"

Such syncretistic approaches have appeal to the cohort of people, apparently larger than average in Seattle, who call themselves spiritual but not religious, says James Wellman, the chair of comparative religion at the University of Washington. In certain cases, this anti-doctrinal impulse is a reaction to global events: since 9/11, some people have moved away from strict, traditional faiths, feeling that religious zeal is a cause of hatred. At the same time, many have had the opposite reaction to turbulent world events, seeking unequivocal clarity about spiritual matters, according to Patrick Kelly, an associate professor at another local campus, Seattle University.

Perhaps there is a risk of overstating the level of contact between the old-fashioned and the experimental. In general, says Mr Kerstetter, it remains true that the traditionalists in southern California who flock to Pastor Warren's megachurches live in a different world from the pick-and-mix experimenters, mostly further north, who like to draw on many religions along with new-age ideas and indigenous practices, or some imitation of them. But America's West coast will always be a place of rapid, unpredictable change and cross-fertilization, as fresh cultural influences sweep in from the interior and across the ocean. Its religious life will probably give us many more surprises.