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PAUL BRAMADAT (University of Victoria)

Religion and Bioregionalism in Cascadia:
The Trouble with Categories



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Abstract

Sociologists, anthropologists, and others interested in the relationship between religion and contemporary society rely on conventional concepts such as religion, spirituality, irreligion, religious “nones,” secularization, and secularity that are bequeathed to us by previous generations of scholars. These are useful tools for our work, but from time to time we encounter a movement, an epoch, or a region that might make us question the adequacy of the concepts and methods we have inherited. In a major ongoing interdisciplinary study of the “Cascadia” bioregion of the Pacific Northwest of North America, I became convinced that the existing metaphors and tools at our disposal limited our ability to see and interpret the data we were collecting. In this Working Paper, I use the large data set my research team created to introduce the concept of “reverential naturalism,” a broad and naturalized schema or metanarrative which helps to explain the ways Cascadians think and talk about religion, spirituality, and nature. Although this metanarrative arguably permeates what we might call the dominant cultural rhetoric of the region, it is as yet so inchoate or subliminal that it is not easy to articulate. Here I identify some of this schema’s main features. At the end of this Working Paper, I address the ways in which this metanarrative generates additional questions that will enrich future reflections on religion both in this region and elsewhere.

Keywords: Cascadia; Pacific Northwest; religion; spirituality; nature; reverential naturalism

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Contents

Preface	7
Operationalizing reverential naturalism	9
The Land of Tomorrow	12
Immanent spirituality, the church of hiking, and ‘fancy nature’	13
Survey Data	21
Conclusion.....	22
References.....	25

Preface

This Working Paper will eventually be a chapter in a book (title to be determined) I am co-editing with US historian Patricia O'Connell Killen, and Canadian sociologist Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme. The project is on contract with the University of British Columbia Press, and is supported by a grant from Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

The book's chapters are based on a large data set we produced, including: an extensive literature review and historical data archive; interviews with religious leaders; oral histories with residents with long family histories in the region; focus groups with millennials; focus groups with regular adherents; visits to religious sites; and the Pacific Northwest Social Survey (a professionally weighted sample of 1510 residents and an additional convenience sample of 841 residents). Data collected from the 54-question PNSS as well as from our many face-to-face encounters in the field provided a rich account of the religious, social, spiritual, and cultural practices and beliefs of residents on both sides of the border. Although our fieldwork focused on the main urban centres of Vancouver (BC), Victoria (BC), Seattle (WA), and Portland (OR) where over 4/5ths of the region's residents live, the PNSS, archive work, and some oral histories involved the more comprehensive British Columbia, Washington, and Oregon area.

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. Readers of this Working Paper may also wish to consult an earlier Working Paper in which I address the core theoretical and empirical issues we investigate in the broader project. It is available at: <https://www.mmg.mpg.de/540568/wp-20-02> .

“Most people will worship God by hiking Mt. Hood on a Sunday morning. That’s kind of the public narrative. [T]his is a place where nature-based spirituality tends to be our native language.” – Reverend Olsen

“No one [in Cascadia] will say ‘Uh, you believe in Mother Earth and the beauty of nature? You’re totally off your rocker.’ Or, ‘Oh. That’s so quaint.’ You don’t get that response [here] so much.” – Sophie

“Yeah, you’re right, you wouldn’t.” – Muhammad

Sociology, history, religious studies, anthropology, and political science help define the questions we address in this book and the debates we have as peers. We arrive at our conclusions by using conventional methods (such as surveys, interviews, archival work, and focus groups) and concepts (such as religion, spirituality, irreligion, nones, secularization, and secularity) that are bequeathed to us by previous generations of scholars. These concepts inspire on-going debates, with some critics contending that even the concept of “religion” is not an obviously meaningful category (Fitzgerald 2007; McCutcheon 1997; 2003). In the interest of our broader objectives we have generally pursued our research as though the conventional methods and concepts are adequate for our purposes. Although I am convinced that my colleagues and I provide a fair and useful account of the communities, individuals, ideas, documents, and discourses we have encountered in the region, it is also true that scholars tend to “look where the light is.” As such, it is useful to ask whether the tools we have inherited from our scholarly forebears are entirely adequate for describing and interpreting complex phenomena, especially when these events, people, discourses and politics are situated in a region that appears to be at the leading edge of major social changes, some of which might not have been anticipated by the major figures in our fields.

While some readers might contend that the conventional questions and categories we use to measure and interpret religion, irreligion and spirituality in this book are quite sufficient, it strikes me that the concept of “reverential naturalism” might help explain what makes this region unusual. In this chapter, I define reverential naturalism as a broad and naturalized schema which helps to explain the ways Cascadians think and talk about religion, spirituality, and nature. We see evidence of the ubiquity of this organizing schema in the Canadian and US stereotypes of the region, branding campaigns, survey and archival data, and the personal stories we heard in our research. Nonetheless, although this metanarrative arguably permeates what we might call the dominant cultural rhetoric of the region, it is as yet so inchoate or subliminal that it is not easy to articulate. So, in an effort to, as it were, de-naturalize

reverential naturalism, I would like to use our data to provide both an operational definition of the term as well as an evidence-based thematization of its main features.

I will return at the end of the chapter to the fundamental question of what difference drawing attention to such a story might make to our understanding of the region. There, I outline the ways in which this metanarrative generates additional questions that will enrich future reflections on the region (and perhaps elsewhere). My hope is that future research may be able to measure (or for that matter dispute) the importance of this shared narrative in the interpretation of the region.

Operationalizing reverential naturalism

Although a common feature of most forms of naturalism would be the assertion or assumption that this-worldly, materialist explanations are sufficient to account for all observable phenomena (Papineau 2017), the variant that seems to be common in Cascadia is neither generally antagonistic nor indifferent toward experience, discourse, or phenomena related to spirituality. Instead, reverential naturalism favours an orientation that is both accepting of scientific approaches to nature and nonetheless inclined to perceive and imagine the natural world in ways that are redolent (from the Latin *olere*, to smell) of mysticism, panentheism, animism, pantheism, and inclusive forms of theism. Reverential naturalism may be considered a metanarrative – with concomitant attitudes, assumptions, habits, and practices with respect to a breathtaking natural world – that animates the individual stories and perspectives of almost all of the people we met during our research.

To be clear, reverential naturalism is not unique to the Pacific Northwest (cf. Barman 1991; Dunlap 2004; Schwantes 1989).¹ It is similar to what other scholars

1 After I wrote this chapter, I discovered that an American Thomist high school teacher, James Chastek, used “reverential naturalism” in one blog post in 2017 to refer to “a version of methodological naturalism, stating that we should not expect divine causality to be appropriate until the inquiry into secondary causes has been more or less completely exhausted, and that it is unreasonable to assume that we are anywhere close to this point yet.” (<https://thomism.wordpress.com/about/>). He is interested in the possibilities of grounding a conventional form of theism, and so I take him to be pointing in a different direction than I am. I also recently discovered that in 1996 the late Unitarian Universalist pastor, William D. Hammond had used the term in a collection of sermons entitled *Ecology of the human spirit: Fourteen discourses in reverential naturalism*, published by the now defunct Rising Press. “Reverential naturalism” was used only a few times in

have called “nature religion,” (Albanese 1990) “religious naturalism,” (Goodenough 1998) and “dark green religion,” (Taylor 2010) both in that there is no antipathy toward a naturalistic orientation and in that there is an interest in themes and values that emerge from or echo conventional religion. Nevertheless, it is important to note that for many – but certainly not all – people in Cascadia, “religion” and “religious” are increasingly problematic and sometimes even inert terms that would not just fail to capture what is occurring in the region, but also fail to resonate with many residents (Kleeb 2013).

Interestingly, the rhetoric associated with reverential naturalism – regardless of who used it – occasioned virtually no resistance during our research. When the metaphors associated with this variant of naturalism (see below) arose in our discussions, there was no eye rolling, no sarcasm or irony, and no condemnations from orthodox religionists (who might be expected to be irritated by the naturalistic perspective) or elderly participants (who might be expected to see this perspective as a threat to conventional religious institutions). Of course, there would be individuals for whom the natural world is entirely comprehensible in materialist terms and thus for whom any talk of reverence or the sublime would be anathema; in truth, I have never met such a person here, but they must exist. Moreover, there would be others for whom a “maximalist” religious consciousness (Lincoln 2003) is normative and thus for whom the privileged place of naturalistic orientations in the region would be deeply misguided. Nonetheless, I want to argue that reverential naturalism is by far the most common, but typically tacit, feature of Pacific Northwest approaches to the natural world and our relationship to it.²

Reverential naturalism is not a new form of religion (which one might expect to become institutionalized or perhaps in some sense to compensate for the losses occasioned by secularization); nor is it merely a type of spirituality (which one might expect to be idiosyncratic and salient mainly to individuals or specific sub-cultures); nor is it simply an expression of implicit (or nascent) irreligion.³ Although as I men-

his collection, and his interests in the sermons were – naturally – pastoral rather than scholarly. As such, he does not delineate the meaning(s) of term clearly.

- 2 Our survey and archival work covered the region as a whole, but it would certainly be the case that the account I am providing mostly emerges from our encounters with urban dwellers. I suspect that people (roughly 20% of the region’s residents) who live outside of these four urban centres would share this perspective on the natural world, but we would need a separate study to confirm this.
- 3 Reverential naturalism better describes this core story than “eco-spirituality,” because in the latter approach, “eco[logical]” is a modifier of the core fact of “spirituality,” whereas

tioned above, further research will be required to address the future of this form of naturalism, I doubt that it names a transient mode of approaching the natural world and religious or spiritual matters.⁴ Instead, this attitude toward nature appears to be the common language used to converse across differences. I use the word “attitude” in its ordinary sense of mood, perspective, or dispositional orientation, but also in the way it is used in dance vernaculars to describe a bodily posture. Reverential naturalism is an embodied perspective, a way of physically being, or being-physical, in a particular geography. Whether or not Pacific Northwesterners actually are more likely than other Canadians or Americans to spend time in the natural environment is beside the point; our research points to the presence of an overarching meaning-conveying narrative according to which a deference to and, for many, a veneration of nature is framed as a distinctive, even definitive, feature of what it means to live well here.

I can now share the elements of the project transcripts, fieldnotes, and supplementary sources that help to flesh out the presence and meaning of this variant of naturalism in Cascadia. In addition to what people explicitly told us in our interviews, focus groups, and surveys, I would argue that we also see evidence of reverential naturalism throughout previous studies (e.g., Killen 2004; Killen and Silk 2004; Todd 2008; Ecotrust 1991; Dunlap 2004; Bunting 1997; O’Connell 2003; Lutz 2007; Pressnell and Henderson 2008; Robbins 2001; Taylor 2010) and our own experiences as residents of the region. I have grouped the data into what seemed to be the common themes evident among our participants; together these bespeak a pervasive regional narrative.

in the former approach, an enriched and open naturalism is the starting point. While spirituality remains an important analytical term, it now refers to so many movements, claims and contexts (from mindfulness practices to tarot cards to mystical Christian practices) that its meaning has become somewhat unclear. Naturalism itself has a long history (Papineau 2016), but in my view it is less encumbered and easier to operationalize than spirituality. Moreover, when I informally “field test” reverential naturalism in a wide range of Cascadian public and private spaces, it often has immediate resonance for people, apparently regardless of their level of interest in religion and spirituality. Conversely, I can say that when I field test “eco-spirituality” some people wince because it is so associated with pagan, new age, and 1970s connotations.

4 The two passages discussed in the first few pages of Chapter 1 span roughly 100 years, and so the narrative seems quite deeply rooted.

The Land of Tomorrow

During an oral history interview, Arthur spoke about his family's arrival in the region from Kentucky several generations ago. "Somebody told them that the Pacific Northwest was the land of tomorrow," he said. The phrase is pregnant with meaning. Cascadians consistently story their region in a manner that underlines the ways it allows not just residents, but all people, to imagine individual lives and whole societies that are unencumbered by the traditions and social constraints that stultify human life elsewhere on the continent and militate against novel creative ventures. This enthusiasm for the region's utopian potential animates the popular 1975 novel, *Ecotopia: The Notebooks and Reports of William Weston*, by Ernest Callenbach. Set in a geography roughly approximating what my colleagues and I call Cascadia South, in what was then a futuristic 1999, the book describes a society that has broken away from the United States. Although a work of fiction, the novel captures the broadly circulating consensus in the region that Cascadia is not just different than other regions, and not just a place of refuge for free-thinkers, but also in some sense the spatialization of possibilities that may exist in nascent form elsewhere.

In our project data, recent arrivals and members of long-settled families shared a clear sense of the marked difference between the region and an actual or imagined elsewhere. As Dustin, a Victoria millennial put it, when he visits other provinces he realizes, "Oh wow, this is a very different culture and conversation happening [in the Pacific Northwest]." This consensus is also evident in what I think of as the "escape stories" that circulate among the relative newcomers to the region. When meeting for the first time, urban (settler) Cascadians often tell stories of how they or their families, as it were, escaped *the other place*. In British Columbia (especially the lower mainland and Vancouver Island), that other place is inevitably one that is storied as colder, more conventional, or more "fast-paced"; in the US, the other place is often framed as too polluted, crowded, tradition-bound, or materialistic (Marks 2007, 2016; Block 2010, 2016; Todd 2008). For example, we met Jane, a Christian whose family has lived in Cascadia South for three generations. In an oral history, she noted:

So we consider, not to be arrogant, but there was a time when we considered ourselves the real Northwesterners. Real Northwesterners live outdoors, they don't even have an umbrella, they are friendly, they don't lock their doors. But the people who are, who are transplants, I would not say those, I don't know very many that have really become Northwest, you know, Northwesterners. So as you're studying Cascadia, what you're really studying is people who have come here from California, or people, and there's a

different culture. People are... attracted by the invisible God and the things we see in creation. But they are running away from all kinds of other things. Hopefully they'll find something that works up here.

Kamal, one of the millennial participants in our focus group in Vancouver, was a more recent arrival in the region, but he also understood its distinctive features:

When I lived in Toronto, I was like, 'It's a city, no one goes away over there'; for the weekend, you're just like in the city and doing city things. [In Ontario there is] just a lot more social contact, a lot more people contact, a lot more ideas and culture, whereas over here it's a lot more nature and hikes.

Beyond the lifestyles the region allows, Cascadia is a place where old forms of solidarity may be shed and new futures may be imagined. The diminished presence of religious communities and attachments interest us in this project, of course. Pastor Novak, an evangelical from Oregon, noted that: "Portland represents and Cascadia represents the beginning of post-Christian America. So, it's just the front end of the post-Christian story in America. America in 50 years is gonna be completely different than it is now and whatever you're seeing here now will be in Kansas in 10 years." However, it is also the case that new forms of spiritual life are arguably easier to identify when conventional religiosity occupies less and less social space. Cascadia as the "land of tomorrow" represents a promise of reconciliation of conflicting forces. Beyond the opportunity to observe syncretic expressions of existing religious practices and traditions (e.g., yoga, Buddhism(s), reiki, Christianity(ies), Traditional Chinese Medicine, Ayurveda, agnosticism, mindfulness), I am suggesting that reverential naturalism captures quite well characteristic aspects of the region's emerging zeitgeist.

Immanent spirituality, the church of hiking, and 'fancy nature'

Compiling the references in our project material to the spiritual value of hiking, camping, running, kayaking, skiing, sailing, paddle boarding, surfing, cycling, or gardening would fill dozens of pages. These comments came in response both to questions we posed about the ways that participants framed their outdoor activities and to broader discussion themes in our semi-structured interviews and focus groups. A few emblematic selections should capture the common themes we encountered.

I should note that there was a remarkable consonance between these stories, regardless of the age, gender, formal religious identity, education, or national location of the participant in question.

The Church of Hiking, and Fancy Nature: I asked one liberal religious minister (who had lived in Portland for a decade) how he would explain the disproportionate number of “religious nones” in the region, and he immediately drew attention to the ways institutional religion – as it is practiced in the rest of North America— struggles in Cascadia. Reverend Richards said that whereas in most of the United States, people would be assumed to have some loyalty to one or another conventional religious identity, in fact,

...[t]he default assumption [in Cascadia] is that you go walk in the woods.... The message of the culture is that where you find your spirituality is out in the pines. Or at the coast, right? Or up Mt. Hood, or wherever your particular piece of nature is. That’s the cultural message, rather than the cultural message being that you go to Vancouver Avenue Baptist.⁵

[...] They come to church regularly, but their spiritual practice, rather than prayer or meditation in some organized fashion is walking in nature. So, that’s almost a ubiquitous feeling here. [...] And living in Portland, it’s very real.

Benjamin, a millennial from Victoria with a professional interest in Christian ministry, also reflected on the tension between the liberal institutional church and reverential naturalism. Speaking during a focus group about a moving lecture he heard about the way all of existence is “imbued with the sacred,” but the way humans now live is in an “imminent frame,” he noted that,

[T]here’s something very transcendent and *beyond* about [the natural world in the region], if we’re willing to see it in that way. And, again, I think our religious systems sometimes miss that opportunity to do that and it doesn’t happen.... So that’s what I see when I think of the outdoors.

Caitlin, an agnostic millennial from Portland, captured the way many speak about hiking:

I have *lots of friends here who talk about hiking being their church or whatever....* I think that really is, in my anecdotal experience, tied to peoples’ spirituality because it’s – *this feels obvious for me to say because I’ve lived here my whole life,* but maybe it’s not. But because we’re so close at any time, wherever you are in the Pacific Northwest, to getting to, like, nature, I think that that really seems to have impacted a lot of people I know.

5 I have added italics to emphasize certain features of these claims.

Pastor Rodrigues, the leader of a new religious movement in Tacoma, Washington, said “Nature is a big factor in this area.... I mean that’s in our spiritual DNA, so to speak.” In response to whether or not his congregants make a link between the natural world and their spirituality, Reverend Olsen, a liberal Protestant minister in Portland commented:

Most people will worship God by hiking Mt. Hood on a Sunday morning. *That’s kind of the public narrative. [...] [T]his is a place where nature-based spirituality tends to be our native language. And the church is sort of secondary to that. [...] I have core families who think nothing of saying, “Oh, you won’t see us next Sunday, we’re going for a hike.” Right? There’s no embarrassment. There’s actually a little bit of pride around it. Like, “We’re going to make the good choice next week. You won’t see us, we’ll be in nature.” And that’s interesting to me, that not only is their broad permission for that, but even a little bit of a, like I feel like they think they’re getting brownie points for it.*

Rabbi Levi, also from Portland, remarked that in this region: “[O]n a certain level, everybody’s an environmentalist [here].... I think that many people find their spirituality, you know, outside, in one form or another. And that that’s a very meaningful spirituality to people.” A Buddhist abbot in Portland echoed this sentiment by saying that the approach to nature among her community would best be described as “Cherishing. One of the things that I hear from people is that they don’t feel quite right unless they make regular trips to the beach or mountains.” Similarly, Linda, a Protestant woman with deep roots in the region noted during an oral history interview: “Yeah, I think that’s an, that’s an important thing that we still take walks in the park as often as we can, and try to do hikes. And get out in God’s work, in creation or whatever. That’s an important part of our, of helping us stay sane, you know.”

Kamal, a millennial Vancouver Muslim who grew up in Toronto, recalls a conversation with an academic mentor in British Columbia with whom he was discussing mosque design.

And [the mentor] was like, ‘What are you talking about mosques for? Spirituality is in the forest.’ My mind was blown, I’m like, ‘Oh okay.’ And that’s when I had this... realization that spirituality is probably not in the city, it’s not at mosque, it’s not in the temple or church, but in nature and *I suspect that might be like a very West Coast way of thinking because I hadn’t heard that articulated in other parts of the world.*

We met Margaret, a woman in her 70s from Victoria, in a focus group. She compared the kind of nature found in Cascadia to what one finds elsewhere in the country.

I think the Pacific Northwest, particularly, *we have such fancy nature*. [laughter] Compared to other [places]. It's hard to ignore it. *I mean, it's right there*. [...] I have a friend, who's an archaeologist [...]. [H]e calls people that do archaeology in Greece "fancy archaeologists," because of course there's so much amazing stuff that you can dig up there [...]. But the Pacific Northwest, it's so spectacular, the natural environment.

From the Easy to the Sublime: It is worth noting that people raised (as I was) in the relatively harsh climate of the northern prairies, are often struck by the tamedness of the wilderness on the west coast. The Pacific Ocean currents guarantee that at least for the coastal areas of Cascadia (where, again, over 4/5ths of the region's residents live), the climate is generally quite moderate. As such, the membrane between indoors and outdoors is far more permeable than in other parts of North America. Father Travis, a Roman Catholic leader in British Columbia (with roots in Manitoba), noted that the history of human habitation in most places in Canada has been quite difficult, whereas

Everything about living here in Cascadia is like, so easy. We have the easy life, everywhere you go, everything is easy. [...] You don't have to have five cords of wood stacked up to stay warm. So, everything about *the environment here is conducive to ease*.

Nonetheless, there is more to the story and experience of reverential naturalism than ease and pleasure. It is also important to observe that when people wax poetic about the region's grand natural qualities, they are sometimes alluding to a *sublime* dimension. The philosophical notion of the sublime can be traced to ancient Greece, where initially it was related to prose and poetry of profound beauty. The concept was later rediscovered by European philosophers (e.g., Burke, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer) and came to be associated with scenes in nature that humans experienced as on the one hand beautiful (in the conventional sense of being harmonious, well-balanced, pleasing, picturesque, attractive) but on the other hand also mystical and terrifying (Shaw 2016).

The very nature of academic prose and the experience being described may limit my ability to convey the terrifying or dread-full aspects of the sublime. Nonetheless, I can approach the task elliptically, by noting that many readers will have had the experience of standing at the edge of an ocean, appreciating the beauty (again, in the conventional sense above) of large waves crashing against the shore. This is an impression one might have *at the same time as* experiencing the visceral sense that the ocean is overwhelming and utterly indifferent to you. To be in the back-country just as the weather shifts, to be in a kayak in the middle of an ocean swell, to cross

paths with a cougar in a park, to stand at the foot of a volcano such as Mt. St. Helens that just a few decades ago wreaked havoc on the region, or to have a relatively small (5-7M) orca or massive (20-27M) fin whale swim beneath one's small vessel: these are moments in which one may be struck by the beauty of the natural world *and* by an anxiety-provoking sense of one's own evanescence. The implications of this kind of dual and vertiginous perception are profound.

One can intuit this sort of experience just below the surface of many of our participants' comments. Jeremy, a millennial from Vancouver, questioned the idea that reverential naturalism might be apparent here in a distinctive way. He noted, "[I]t feels weird to think that like there is something special about this land that makes people extra reverential, that seems ridiculous actually. Like what, like other land isn't amazing?" However, he immediately added that there is something distinctive and ineffable about his experiences here:

[B]ut... at the same time, there does seem to be something that when I meet people from the West Coast and other places that we connect a lot of times on that subject [of the sublime and reverential aspects of the natural world], around a certain type of reverence or a certain way of speaking about it. I don't know what it is.... I have lots of reverential experiences in [Cascadia], something hard to quite pin down, I'm afraid to pin in down, because it's going to be inaccurate when I do.

As Samuel, a millennial surfer from Victoria put it during a focus group when talking about what it is like to wait for a wave in the deep, frigid, turbulent waters off Tofino when he knows he shares the space with porpoises, whales, seals, otters, sea lions and jagged rocks,

I feel like being kind of immersed in nature in that way, physically being in the ocean, being present there, like, witnessing all of these natural powers, whether or not it's animals or waves coming at you or whatever, and just like seeing the landscape from out there has a very kind of awe-inspiring effect on you. To me, when I think about describing it, it feels profound, it feels spiritual, it feels significant.

Public Discourse and Personal Anguish: When we reflect on two stories covered extensively in the media, we find additional evidence of the metanarrative I am tracing. First, for several weeks in 2018, Cascadians were reminded almost daily of a tragedy unfolding in the "Salish Sea," as the inland sea between Puget Sound (near Seattle) and the northern reach of the Strait of Georgia (north of Vancouver) has recently been renamed in honour of Coast Salish peoples. As dozens of news outlets reported, on August 13, 2018, a female orca finally released a dead calf she had been

balancing on her nose for seventeen days. The orca mother in question is J35, or Tahlequah, a 20-year old member of the “J Pod” of “southern resident” killer whales that live in the Salish Sea. Tahlequah had been engaged in what journalists and biologists throughout the region described as uncharacteristic “grieving” and “mourning” behavior that would certainly jeopardize her own life if it continued.⁶ The orcas are threatened because their food supply – mostly coho salmon – has been diminished by (among other possible factors) changes in ocean and river patterns related to climate change, over-fishing, fish farming, vessel traffic, and seals and sea lions (which also eat coho). As well, public concern has been expressed about the plans (of the Canadian federal government as well as international oil companies) to increase massively the capacity of existing pipelines to bring diluted bitumen from the Alberta tar sands thousands of kilometres south-west to a harbour in Burnaby (part of the Greater Vancouver Area), bound mostly for Asia.⁷ The consequences of a virtually inevitable oil spill have become a central concern in the region.

The popularity of J Pod might be explained by the fact that orcas are aesthetically striking, live in close proximity to humans, live in hierarchical and intimate family units (like humans), and have a provocative name (actually, there is no record of orcas attacking humans in the wild). For this chapter, the actual cause of J Pod’s general plight and Tahlequah’s particular grief are less interesting than the fact that the drama unfolding in the Salish Sea was typically framed as a symptom of an imbalance in the region between its untamed reverence-inducing natural splendor and the powerful turn toward corporate priorities.⁸ More to the point, campaigns meant to

6 Orcas may be considered “charismatic mega-fauna,” (Kaufman and Franz 2000: 342) large iconic animals with broad appeal that galvanize public opinion around environmental concerns or tourism campaigns (cf. Colby 2018).

7 <https://www.wildernesscommittee.org/take-action/write-wild-more-killer-whale-critical-habitat-and-better-protection?> See also: <https://www.cnn.com/2018/08/10/us/orca-whale-still-carrying-dead-baby-trnd/index.html>
<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/2018/08/orca-mourning-calf-killer-whale-northwest-news/>
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/grandmother-orca-jpod-at-risk-of-dying-1.4968739>

8 These concerns are certainly captured in the ways the stories of J 35’s grief and J Pod’s future are told by groups such as the Wilderness Committee as well as the Sierra Club. A week before the end of J 35’s apparent refusal to accept her calf’s death, the Sierra Club of BC penned a press release that read: ‘We have been following the story of J-35’s grief with broken hearts. It is an overwhelming tragedy on our coast that should be a watershed moment where the plight of the orcas solidifies in the public consciousness

prevent us from finally destroying animals that are framed as pristine, innocent and noble, arguably come to symbolize the larger threat to survival of life on the planet.

Second, the cost of living in the region has become one of the galvanizing concerns animating younger urban residents. These worries were by far the most acute in Vancouver and Seattle, where for a variety of reasons it is difficult for many young people – even educated professionals – to imagine ever owning a home. It might seem strange to include this-worldly troubles regarding rents, mortgages, down payments, and basement suites in a chapter that traces the contours of reverential naturalism. However, throughout our study, residents routinely frame the natural environment as a site of some inextinguishable, ineffable, and reverence-worthy spiritual presence. As often rather unforgiving modern neo-liberal priorities come more and more to define these urban spaces, the easily accessible woods, mountains, and oceans (in “fancy” nature) regularly become storied as both besieged (subject, for example, to the depredations of oil companies) and spiritually restorative. A relatively tame and spiritualized nature may thus compensate for the unforgiving realities of a certain kind of capitalism. In this land of tomorrow, the land and sea are framed as both extremely vulnerable and also imbued with an indefatigable capacity to humble, nurture, and inspire humans.

Exceptions, and the rule: According to what I called the “Cascadia consensus” in the first chapter of this book, the natural world in the region is fancy, conducive to ease, within easy reach of urbanites, a site of restoration and renewal, and imbued with spiritual meaning. Furthermore, treating the natural world as set-apart, sacred, sublime, or spiritual, is integral to our native language, part of our spiritual DNA, taken for granted by people born here, part of an ubiquitous feeling, and the default orientation of residents regardless of age, nationality, or formal religious identity.

Nevertheless, it is important also to identify themes that challenge the dominant account. For example, however appealing the environment seems to those who might perceive the region as pristine, the broader more critical environmental movement troubles this notion. While Reverend Richards (see above) articulated his own and his community’s commitment to reverential naturalism, he also noted,

[F]or a long time, this congregation bought into the notion that environmentalism meant saving the pristine wilderness. [...] And now I think most of the people in this congregation have heard enough, they’ve learned enough, to know that that’s not the be all and the

as at a crisis point,’ said Simon Pidcock, Head Captain of Ocean Ecoventures.’ <https://sierraclub.bc.ca/tag/whales/>

end all, although that may be a part of it. You know, it's also about where the sludge and the trash is deposited and whose communities are adjacent to it.

The Cascadian consensus and its characteristic approach to nature are also somewhat socially hegemonic. Some people have therefore become fatigued by both its ubiquity and its tendency to obscure some of the harder truths of the region. In fact, the concentration of the vast majority of the region's population in four western liberal cities can create, in the words of Dustin, a Victoria millennial, "an echo chamber. Like, even in classrooms, it's very difficult to approach a different side [of environmental issues], out of curiosity, without being very ostracised by fellow students."

As well, the approach to both nature and institutions in the region may also threaten religious institutions. Reverend Olsen colourfully articulated some misgivings about the dominant narrative:

Like, it's one of the places where I feel like my inner asshole, like, "Come on, you guys." Yeah, I feel good when I look at a pretty view too, but that's, is that God? There's a piece of me that really kind of wants to unsettle that a little bit. 'Cause sometimes it feels really thin to me. Yeah.I feel like in some ways [the natural world] gets pitted against more traditional forms of Christianity, like, you can do that weird Nicene Creed thing, but we're all going to go here and pray to an earth goddess. And I think, 'bullshit.'... So, there are ways in which I'm a little suspicious of that narrative. I recognize that it has a lot of cultural valence and there's a lot of people for whom that is an important thing. It is certainly a phenomenon in this neck of the world, and I sometimes feel like I kinda wanna push back on it. [...] Like, I'm a church guy.[...] Music is probably for me a native spiritual language. Nature, I can speak that language, I'm maybe a little bilingual in it, but it's not my native tongue.

Olsen's concerns about the impact of reverential naturalism on the viability of traditional organizations were shared by Rabbi Bauman, from Seattle, who noted:

I think there are a lot of people who still feel that this is kind of the frontier... [characterized by] *rugged individualism, but in a spiritual kind of vein*. People here just, they want meaning, but they want it with fewer obligations and commitment. [...] Because I think they feel like they come out here and, you know, they find God in nature, or spirituality in nature, or in yoga, or in their co-op and whatever [...].

While the default approach in the region is one in which virtually everyone we met, from atheists to Anglicans, imagined the natural world to be integrally reflective of beauty, mystery and awe, there are also discourses and sub-cultures in which one can find a more conventional perspective on the location of spiritual energy and what it

might mean to spend time outside. Even in the dissenting voices, though, there is a clear recognition that this characteristic approach to spirituality is ubiquitous.

Survey Data

In the Pacific Northwest Social Survey (PNSS), participants were asked how often they engage in outdoor and environmental activities, and to what extent these activities were experienced or construed as spiritual.⁹ The results were interesting, and have a bearing on the themes that concern me in this chapter. An estimated 62% of residents of Cascadia North (British Columbia) and 54% of people from Cascadia South (Washington and Oregon) indicate that they participate at least once a month in outdoor activities. Among respondents who took part in outdoor activities at least once in the year prior to the survey, 52% of Canadians and 48% of Americans describe their experiences as either definitely or probably spiritual. These figures are parallel in that Canadians seem both slightly more active and more likely than Americans to associate these activities with spiritual meaning. This pattern is echoed in the data related to environmental activities: 40% of British Columbians and 41% of residents of Washington and Oregon indicated that they participated in such activities at least once a month; 53% of the Canadian participants and 48% of the US residents who took part in such activities at least once a year attributed a spiritual meaning to them (either definitely or probably).

Although we would need to conduct this study in other regions in North America in order to draw strong conclusions about whether Cascadia is unusual in this regard, the quantitative data at least appears to indicate high levels of both engagement in and support of activities in the natural world as well as fairly high levels of attribution of spiritual significance to those activities. As the above qualitative section of the chapter demonstrates, this way of engaging and storying experiences in the natu-

⁹ In the survey we provided the following definition of “spiritual experience”: a profound and usually positive experience that helps individuals find their authentic self, as well as connects them to a mysterious, universal, and overarching reality. As well, we defined “environmental activities” as “Activities to help the environment/the natural world.” There are limitations to using such broadly defined terms, but as long as all participants are answering the same question within the same context, it is still useful to compare and contrast responses.

ral world is a deeply embedded part of what reverend Olsen referred to as the “native language” of the bio-region.

Conclusion

Our qualitative and quantitative data confirm previous studies showing the decline of the dominant conventional forms of religiosity. The declines are real, and, it appears, more or less uni-directional for the main Protestant and Catholic communities. So, it is quite understandable that when scholars think and write about the region, we spend most of our energy trying to understand and explain how so many forms of conventional religiosity seem to mean less – both socially and individually – in the Pacific Northwest than elsewhere in Canada and the US. Of course, it is also common among scholars to observe some exceptions to (or peculiarities of) this general trend: the growth of mostly Asian religious minority communities; the relative strength of fairly new urban evangelical congregations; revitalization movements among Indigenous people; and the popularity of something akin to spiritual bricolage or syncretism. It seems unlikely that these phenomena will alter the general trend-lines in the region with regard to organized religion.

However, in this chapter I have suggested that it may be worthwhile to consider adding one more concept to our analytical toolbox. I described reverential naturalism as a metanarrative that helps to inform individual stories in and about the region. This is evident, though often *sotto voce*, in our project data, the growing academic literature on the region, and both informal popular cultural narratives and formal branding of the region. It is important to underline that while this is a form of naturalism, it is not generally an adversarial variant. Moreover, even for religiously identified individuals (as with the young architect, Kamal, above), it seems to be fairly unproblematic, and even predictable, that the natural world might sometimes supplant the built environment of formal religious institutions as the *sanctum sanctorum* of spiritual life in the Pacific Northwest. Furthermore, integral to this grand narrative is the trope that even for people with no interest in religious or spiritual rhetoric, the Cascadian natural environment is distinctively sublime, arresting, majestic, restorative, and humbling. This reverence-worthy force is not *only* located in the natural world, but it is reliably, conveniently, and distinctively *there*. In fact, this is such a common-sense notion that Reverend Olsen realized that to question it out loud

was itself rather scandalous.¹⁰ Olsen's reticence speaks both to the decline of conventional religiosity and the ubiquity of this metanarrative.

Relations between the religious, spiritual, and irreligious populations in the region strike me as remarkably congenial. As mentioned elsewhere in this volume, there is a strong "you do you" orientation in the region. Sophie, a Vancouver millennial, contrasted Cascadia with the rest of the country: "No one [in Cascadia] will say 'Uh, you believe in Mother Earth and the beauty of nature? You're totally off your rocker.' Or, 'Oh. That's so quaint.' You don't get that response [here] so much." Muhammad, her fellow focus group member and a Muslim, said, "Yeah, you're right, you wouldn't."

What this "land of tomorrow" portends for the rest of the continent is difficult to predict, but it is arguably the case that what we see clearly in Cascadia are exemplary (though not unproblematic) responses to fault lines that run through other places. For example, the region is home to a range of environmental movements that transcend borders (and other limitations) and may offer us insights into how to respond to climate change and pollution. In addition, as our colleague Chelsea Horton observes in this volume, Cascadia North is the site of a dramatic resurgence in Indigenous pride and political activism, largely because most of British Columbia is "unceded" and the Indigenous community represents a larger proportion of the provincial population when compared with their respective populations within Washington and Oregon. British Columbia may thus offer some lessons about how reconciliation might work elsewhere in the continent. Moreover, the Pacific Northwest is also the location of some of the continent's largest and most powerful corporations (Starbucks, Boeing, Amazon, Costco, Microsoft), a fact that has laid bare some of the environmental and social consequences of late capitalism.

Reverential naturalism is not a new religion, an ersatz personal spirituality, or a stepping stone from religious identification to complete "irreligion." It might function in these manners for certain individuals, but it is more helpful to see it as constituting a deep narrative that co-exists with and complicates the concepts and categories we normally use to analyze religion (e.g., religious, spiritual, irreligious, nones, spiritual but not religious, etc.). Reverential naturalism is so ubiquitous in the data we collected and in the existing writing on the region that it is arguably worthwhile, first, to identify it as a coherent metanarrative, and second, to consider it as a part of the broader social reality against which we might read existing and emerging data.

10 Indeed, he said to question such an assumption would be to reveal his "inner asshole."

What name we give to this narrative is of less importance than the new questions we might ask about its origins and uses. For example:

- How is the story instrumentalized in corporate or governmental branding exercises (such as the “Best Place on Earth” campaign in British Columbia)?¹¹
- Does this popular variant of naturalism suggest that the conventional “religion versus science” dichotomy that is such a prominent feature of the so-called “culture wars” might be less salient in Cascadia than in other regions in North America?
- How might reverential naturalism resonate differently for people of different social classes (i.e., would people with less access to expensive camping, kayaking, or hiking equipment, not to mention transportation and vacation opportunities, be less inclined to embrace it)?
- How might the story be of use to Indigenous peoples with an interest in problematizing the role of Christianity in their communities?
- Do mainline religious communities respond to this schema as a threat or an opportunity?
- Are ethno-religious minority communities as likely to accept the rhetoric of reverential naturalism as members of the more settled and even nominally Christian community?
- Do Cascadian millennials use or approach this narrative in the same way as older residents?
- Does the narrative take different forms in Cascadia North and South?

These questions might take us deeper into the “elusive utopia” (Todd 2008) that is the “Great Green Land” (McCloskey 2015) of Cascadia. It is certainly clear that many residents see this “imagined geography” (Said 1978) as the land of tomorrow. What we can also observe is that reverential naturalism seems to be implicit in the stories told by people who are formally aligned with institutional religions and by those who would never darken the door of a religious group. This shared story seems to orient the region’s residents on a map that is both real and imaginary. It is difficult to say whether or not the approach to the natural world, religion, irreligion and spirituality that we see in Cascadia is a harbinger of changes to come in other places, but the upheavals occasioned by climate change and secularization (among other things) might well lead people in other regions in a similar direction.

11 See: “Oregon, Only Slightly Exaggerated. Welcome to Oregon: a 100% real place. But when you’re here, you might swear otherwise.” <https://traveloregon.com/>

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