

Religion and Regional Culture: Embedding Religious Commitment within Place

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Recently, there has been a call for social scientific studies of religion to start taking “place” seriously. This paper adds to this growing literature by embedding religious commitment within place. We propose that the tension religious groups experience with their surroundings partly depends on local contexts and that certain types of local contexts may generate more tension. These contexts include regions in which the nonreligiously affiliated constitute the majority of the population, such as the American Pacific Northwest (PNW) region. Analysis of qualitative data on evangelical and liberal Protestants from western Oregon and western Washington suggests that they are aware of and experience tension with the regional PNW culture, which shapes their religious experience.

Key words: qualitative methods; Protestant Christianity; evangelical protestantism; mainline Protestants; United States of America; culture; place; commitment; Pacific Northwest.

INTRODUCTION

There has been a call in sociology to take “place” more seriously (Gieryn 2000), followed by similar calls within the subfield of religion (Williams 2005, 2011). The understanding that “context matters” is a core tenant of social scientific studies and the field of sociology itself, yet understanding religion within a particular physical or geographical context has been under-studied and under-theorized (Williams 2002, 2005, 2011; for notable exceptions, see Livezey (2000), Orsi (1999), and Pogorelc (2011)). This begs the question: “How do we locate social life in a place, and understand how it is affected by that place?”

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(Williams 2005:239). We propose that a main way to seriously consider the role of context is to incorporate place into theories of religion.

Iannaccone's (1994), Stark and Finke's (2000), and Smith et al.'s (1998) theories of religious commitment all include some environmental component where religious commitment is affected by the level of distinction, tension, or conflict a religious group has with its surroundings. Yet what is meant by "surroundings" is never fully explicated. It seems these and other studies assume liberal national "surroundings", since they identify conservative religious groups as in tension or conflict and typically use national datasets to test these theories. While religious groups can be affected by national contexts, we argue that everyday lived religion takes place in local contexts that shape religious experience (Williams 2004). These contexts are not always liberal and the liberal or conservative nature of a context is only one of many characteristics that can generate tension. We highlight how tension is not an intrinsic property of a religious group, such as theology or denominational affiliation, but rather, is a function of both internal characteristics of religious groups and external characteristics of the environment. Thus, we propose that even theologically liberal religious groups may experience tension in particular environments. Moreover, while all three theories tend to emphasize oppositional relationships (i.e., antagonism or conflict) between religious groups and their surroundings, we suggest that even religious groups that experience tension with their local environment can form cooperative and collaborative relationships with it.

We combine insights from these theories and studies of place to suggest that certain types of local contexts may generate more distinction and tension with religious groups, which influence the ways in which they experience and live out their faith. We suggest one such location: regions in which the nonreligiously affiliated constitute the majority of the population thereby creating a secular regional ethos. The American Pacific Northwest (PNW; Alaska, Oregon, and Washington states) exemplifies this type of location having "the lowest affiliation with religious institutions of any region in the United States" (Killen and Shibley 2004:25). In a regional culture where religiosity is neither assumed nor forced on anyone (Silk and Walsh 2008; Wellman 2008), what are the experiences of the church-affiliated minority and how are they shaped by the secular PNW culture? Do they experience tension and, if so, in what ways? To answer these questions, we conducted interviews and focus groups in 34 vital evangelical (24) and liberal (10) Protestant churches, in western Oregon and western Washington. Through these interviews we noticed that both evangelical and liberal Protestant respondents were aware of and experienced tension with the regional PNW culture, which shaped their religious experience.

We begin by describing theories of religious commitment and identifying how place can be incorporated into them. Second, we discuss literature on regional cultures and religion with a particular focus on the PNW. Third, we describe our data and methodology and present our qualitative findings. Finally, we discuss the broader implications of the findings for the study of religion and place.

PLACE AND THEORIES OF RELIGIOUS COMMITMENT

Iannaccone's (1994), Stark and Finke's (2000), and Smith et al.'s (1998) theories of religious strength/religious commitment all incorporate the importance of environmental contexts. Iannaccone (1994) proposes that the more behavioral strictures a religious group has, the higher the group's average level of member commitment. This, he argues, is due to strict churches yielding greater benefits to members through excluding free-riders and providing social contexts for interaction with highly committed members (Iannaccone 1994). Yet, what is costly or strict depends on the environment in which a religious group resides. Church strictures regarding "diet, dress, grooming, and social customs" are costly only to the extent that they make religious members distinct, thereby making "participation in alternative activities more costly" (Iannaccone 1994:1118). Thus, the theory proposes that an optimal level of church strictness/costliness requires maintaining a certain amount of tension with the environment such that the religious group keeps its distinctiveness, while at the same time not becoming overly costly (Iannaccone 1994:1203).

Furthering the concept of tension, Stark and Finke (2000) argue that it is not just behavioral restrictions that produce tension but also distinct beliefs. They define tension as the "degree of distinctiveness, separation, and antagonism between a religious group and the 'outside' world" (Stark and Finke 2000:143) and propose that religious groups in high tension with the surrounding environment should have higher levels of religious commitment, because they offer their members greater benefits for participation (Stark and Finke 2000). Iannaccone (1994) and Stark and Finke (2000) use their theories to account for the high levels of commitment exhibited in strict or high-tension religious groups, such as Mormons, Pentecostals, and fundamentalist Christians.¹ Religious groups are defined as high tension or strict based on the beliefs and/or behaviors of their denominations with little explicit consideration for the actual local context. Yet, the level of tension a religious group experiences is by definition relative to its environment. The same religious group may experience high tension in one environment and low-tension in another depending entirely on how distinct, separate, or antagonistic it is relative to its environment.

Smith et al.'s (1998) subcultural identity theory of religion also predicts that high-tension religious groups should have higher levels of commitment without assuming that individuals are seeking to gain benefits. Instead, the theory assumes that individuals need and seek collective identities that provide them with clear and strong moral guidelines. A collective identity is stronger the more

¹Iannaccone's (1994) strict church theory is not without critics. While some studies (Hoge et al. 1996; Olson and Perl 2001, 2005) examining interdenominational differences in strictness have supported Iannaccone's (1994) findings, other studies (Roof et al. 1979; Perry and Hoge 1981) examining church strictness within single denominations have found a weak or nonsignificant effect.

distinction there is between the group and nonmembers. The conflict that erupts from interaction with nonmembers serves to reinforce the collective identity by highlighting the differences between outsiders and group members. High-tension religious groups will consequently have strong collective identities as long as they do not become entirely countercultural (i.e., stop engaging with the culture). Since members depend on the group for their collective identity, the stronger the collective identity is the higher the level of member commitment. Smith et al.'s (1998) theory also rests on interaction between a religious group and its environment, such that conflict between the two results in a greater collective identity for the religious group. Similar to Stark and Finke's (2000) theory, although a religious group may experience conflict or tension in one environment, it may experience little conflict in another environment. Therefore, the interaction between a religious group and its environment is vital for understanding member commitment, yet Smith et al. (1998) mostly focus on comparing the beliefs and values of American evangelicals to other Americans, rather than investigating more local contexts.

For all three theories a religious group's surroundings matter, yet studies using these theories have failed to adequately take place into consideration. Instead theologically conservative religious groups (e.g., Evangelicals and Mormons) are labeled as distinctive, strict, or in conflict with society without considering whether these religious groups are actually distinct from or in conflict with their *local* environments. By identifying tension based on conservative expressions of religion, these studies implicitly assume a liberal environment. But environments are not always liberal; they may be conservative, churched, or unchurched, made up predominately of one religious tradition or religiously diverse traditions. They can also be secular and even anti-religious, including libertarian types whereby individualism trumps other collective values, as well as religion, whether conservative or liberal. Environments also exist at different levels, such as neighborhoods, cities, regions, states, and nations, all of which have different pressure points on religious groups, making generalizations based on religious tradition nearly useless in predicting how religious groups will experience their environments. Thus, theologically conservative religious groups may not always be distinct from or in conflict with their local surroundings (e.g., Mormons in Utah), whereas other groups often not considered in tension, such as liberal Protestants, may be. Even religious groups that do experience tension with their local environment, in terms of feeling distinctive and separate (two components of tension according to Stark and Finke 2000), may not necessarily experience antagonism or conflict. By emphasizing oppositional relationships (i.e., antagonism or conflict) between higher tension religious groups and their environment, these theories have neglected to consider how religious groups, whether in tension or not, may also have cooperative and collaborative relationships with their local environments.

Studies in the sociology of place and religion show how religious groups can utilize resources in their local environments as well as incorporate the surrounding local culture into their religious beliefs and practices in ways that can facilitate

vitality. These cooperative relationships may be conscious and strategic or unconscious reflections of residing in a particular context. For example, Pogorelc (2011) showed how the liberal, social activist spirit of Chicago and its historical precedence were cultural resources for liberal, social activists involved in Catholic Action—a social movement organization with roots in the Catholic Church. Form and Dubrow (2005) identified various context-specific strategies metropolitan churches used to adapt to the changing conditions of the city. This literature contributes to theories of religious commitment by demonstrating how cooperative relationships with local environments may also promote religious commitment.

The objective of the current study is not to test these theories of religious commitment, but to examine in a more local context how religious groups are shaped by and respond to tension with their local environments and how these responses may be oppositional, cooperative, or both. By separating dimensions of tension from religious affiliation and exploring how tension resides in the relationship between religious groups and their local environments, we make several important contributions to the literature: (1) we demonstrate how tension can be experienced relative to local contexts, rather than merely in regards to amorphous “surroundings”; (2) we show how religious groups traditionally categorized as “low tension” may experience tension with their particular local environments, while at the same time reflecting them; and also (3) how religious groups traditionally categorized as “high tension” may have collaborative relationships with their local environments even while experiencing tension with them. To do so we focus on one particular local context: regional culture.

REGIONAL CULTURES AND RELIGION IN THE PNW

While American regions are becoming more homogeneous in terms of certain socio-demographic characteristics, regional religious differences remain (Hill 1985). The type of religion and the manner and extent to which it is practiced is “connected to the public cultures of different parts of the country; they shape and are shaped by them” (Silk 2005:265). Silk and Walsh (2008) provide empirical evidence that regional cultures affect religious groups such that religious groups within the same region may be more similar to each other than they are to religious groups within their own denomination in other regions. Thus, region is an important local context to consider.

The PNW region—Alaska, Oregon, and Washington—is generally considered to have a relatively homogeneous religious market known for its largely unchurched population. Killen (2004) provides a detailed description of the PNW region.² Roughly 63 percent of PNW residents are unaffiliated with a religious

²A core dataset Killen (2004) used—the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS)—did not include survey data on Alaska, making it necessary to assume that Alaska’s population is congruent with the survey findings for Oregon and Washington.

group versus approximately 41 percent for the nation. In the United States, a nation known for its religious exceptionalism, which tends to exhibit higher levels of religiosity than Europe (Stark and Finke 2000), the PNW is the exception. More individuals in the PNW “claim ‘none’ when asked their religious identification than in any other region in the United States” (Killen 2004:9). Thus the region has appropriately been labeled the “none zone” (Killen 2004).

Among the nones, there is still a fairly pervasive spirituality. Two-thirds of these nones believe that God exists suggesting a “secular but spiritual” ethos in the PNW (Shibley 2004). Shibley (2004) proposes that “nature religion”—the sacralization of nature—is the dominant civil religion in the region. People in the PNW often view the beauty of the outdoors as their “sanctuary” and “chapel” and the wilderness as a place to experience the divine (Shibley 2004, 2011). Shibley suggests that this alternative secular spirituality creates tension with the church-based population.

While the unique PNW religious regional culture has basically always been this way (Killen 2004), there are few studies of it (see Killen and Silk 2004; Silk and Walsh 2008; Wellman 2008 for notable exceptions). In particular, Wellman’s (2008) book elucidates the moral worldviews of evangelical and liberal Protestants in the PNW and how these worldviews affect their vitality and shape their rituals, organizational structures, and mission trips. Although Wellman’s study provides extensive comparisons between the beliefs, values, and practices of PNW evangelical and liberal Protestants, it does not focus on their interaction with the PNW culture. Consequently, we know little about the church-affiliated minority’s experiences with the PNW regional culture, which this study seeks to rectify. The PNW provides an opportunity to investigate conflict and tension (i.e., distinction, separation, and/or antagonism) between religious groups and their secular but spiritual surroundings and the different ways in which religious groups respond (i.e., oppositional, cooperative, or both).

METHODOLOGY

This study draws from a larger research project examining 24 of the fastest growing evangelical churches³ and 10 vital liberal Protestant churches⁴ in western Oregon and western Washington. Evangelical churches were included that had shown substantial growth in numbers (at least 25 percent) and finances

³Following Bebbington (1989) and Noll (2001), we define evangelical as the umbrella term for conservative Christians in American culture.

⁴We define liberal Protestant congregations according to a distinct set of ideological characteristics. They generally propose that Jesus is a model of radical inclusiveness, justify themselves by reason as well as by tradition or scripture, and leave decision-making about faith or personal morality to the individual. They also have a liberal theology that advocates for the concerns and rights of homosexuals and supports justice causes such as peace, ending homelessness, and ecological stewardship (Ammerman 1997, 2005; Wellman 1999, 2002).

between 2000 and 2005. The vital liberal churches had maintained stable congregational numbers, finances, and church identity during a similar time period.

The evangelical churches were identified from a dataset of over 1,300 churches that supported the large Luis Palau evangelical festivals in Portland and Seattle (1999 and 2002, respectively).⁵ Their median growth rate was almost 90 percent suggesting their vitality. Thirteen of the churches were in western Washington and 11 were in western Oregon. Eight megachurches⁶ were a part of the sample, four from western Washington and four from western Oregon. The denominational affiliations of the evangelical churches are the following: two Presbyterian Church USA, three Baptist, nine Holiness/Wesleyan/Pentecostal (Foursquare, Assemblies of God, Church of the Nazarene, and Christian Alliance Church), nine nondenominational, and one Calvary Chapel. Our evangelical sample is fairly representative of the denominational distribution of evangelical churches in the PNW (see Killen 2004:29) with the exception that our sample includes more nondenominational churches and less Baptist churches. Considering Wellman's (2004) findings that PNW-independent entrepreneurial evangelical churches are surpassing classical evangelical churches (e.g., Southern Baptists) in growth, the slight overrepresentation of nondenominational churches compared with Baptist churches seems appropriate given our sample population was successful evangelical PNW churches.

We identified the liberal churches by speaking to mainline Protestant executives who knew of liberal or progressive churches that were vital and even growing. We spoke with pastors and other laypeople who helped us choose churches that met the criteria of having either grown or at least remained the same in numbers and finances over the previous three years. The set of 10 churches included three Congregational and three Episcopal churches, and one of each of the following: Presbyterian Church (USA), United Methodist Church, Lutheran Church (ELCA), and an American Baptist congregation.

The goal of the larger research project was to choose churches that best fit an ideal type of evangelical or liberal Protestantism. The purpose of this project was not to collect a random sample of churches, but to study vital churches in order to examine how they experience the unchurched PNW. Churches, like other organizations, experience institutional isomorphism. They often seek and tend to model themselves after churches deemed more successful or legitimate, what DiMaggio and Powell (1983) describe as the process of mimetic institutional isomorphism. The success of the churches in our sample has placed them in a

⁵The large Luis Palau festivals in Oregon (2000) and Washington (2002) suggested a strong evangelical revival that deserved close analysis. Owing to this, like the ARIS, our study also excludes Alaska from our analysis allowing us to more closely analyze evangelicals in Oregon and Washington using in-depth interviews and focus groups.

⁶We define megachurches as congregations having "an average weekly worship attendance of 2000 or more" (Thumma 2001).

position to be noticed and mirrored by local PNW churches. While these churches may not be entirely representative of evangelical and liberal Protestant churches in the PNW, they may serve as models for other churches in the region. Nonetheless, since our sample includes only vital churches, the findings should be interpreted with caution to other churches.

From December of 2003 to August of 2005, we observed church services, read church materials, visited church websites, interviewed the senior pastor, and conducted focus groups comprised of lay leaders and new members (those who had been members for under two years) for each church. The interviews were semi-structured and consisted of open-ended questions regarding their faith, church, politics, and views regarding the PNW region. Respondents were directly asked about their educational, geographic, and religious background. Sex was coded based on observation. Interviews were recorded and transcribed by a research assistant. A two-person research team independently read, discussed, and coded the transcriptions of the interviews. We began by coding the data based on general topics covered by the open-ended questions particularly relating to the respondents' views of and relationship with the PNW region and culture. Next, we identified more specific themes within these topics and then compared our work and adjusted and consolidated our coding themes. Finally, we read through the interviews again guided by a coding framework emphasizing: (1) the characterization of PNW culture as unchurched, secular, liberal, and/or immoral; (2) the characterization of PNW culture as having an independent, individualistic, libertarian, or "spiritual, but not religious" spirit/ethos; (3) the characterization of PNW culture as lacking institutional/cultural support for religion; (4) secular PNW activities that are thought to compete with religion (i.e., sports and recreation); (5) the tension, conflict, or affinity respondents experience with the PNW culture identified in themes 1 through 4; and (6) how the churches respond to themes 1 through 4, particularly in terms of outreach strategies, ministries, or programs (e.g., building community relationships and environmental, artistic, interfaith, and coffee ministries).

It is important to note that while all the evangelical churches and some of the liberal churches mentioned responding to culture, our coding scheme reflects those that identified responding to the PNW culture specifically. We coded responses as relating to the PNW if they discussed the culture, region, or values of: the PNW, the northwest, Oregon, Washington, Portland, or Seattle. We coded respondents as experiencing tension with the PNW if they used words such as tension, conflict, battle, clash, war, persecuted, attacked, or oppressed to describe their relationship with the PNW and/or if they described themselves or their values as being different, distinct, or separate from the PNW. We considered tension oppositional when the respondent used extreme negative terms to describe it, such as battle, war, persecution, attacked, and oppressed. Finally, we coded cooperative/collaborative relationships with the PNW based on whether the respondents identified themselves or their church as embracing, sharing, or

reflecting all or some attributes of the PNW culture, which included respondents who directly stated such as well as respondents who identified ways they or their church have specifically attempted to reach out to PNWers through targeted outreach strategies, ministries, or programs.

We provide frequencies for the number of times particular answers were given and then provide qualitative quotes as examples of certain common types of responses. Because all but the senior pastor interviews were conducted in focus groups, we provide frequencies regarding the number of churches in which various answers were given. Often in the focus groups, if one respondent mentioned a particular outreach strategy, ministry, program, or event, the other respondents would not repeat it, but would instead provide other examples. As such, in most cases, frequencies for the number of respondents who gave the same answer were not as useful as how many churches had respondents provide a particular response, which demonstrates the breadth of an answer across congregations. For most quotes, we provide the gender of the respondent and information regarding the church, specifically, denominational affiliation (or nondenominational status), if it is a megachurch, whether it is located in an urban, suburban, or rural area, and whether it resides in the greater Seattle or greater Portland areas. We refer to churches in the greater Seattle area as “Seattle churches” and churches in the greater Portland area as “Portland churches.” In some cases, denominational affiliation is withheld, which, combined with the other information, could potentially identify the congregation.

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for the data. There were 145 and 298 liberal and evangelical respondents, respectively. The two groups have quite distinct gender breakdowns. In the liberal churches, the female respondents outnumber the males, whereas for the evangelical respondents males outnumber females. The larger proportion of men to women in the evangelical sample is partially due to all but one of the evangelical churches having male senior pastors—the one exception is a church in which the senior pastor position was shared by a husband and wife team. Respondents are highly educated with roughly 90 percent of liberal respondents and 70 percent of evangelical respondents having some form of college education. In terms of their religious upbringing, the majority of respondents were raised in their current religious tradition. Few respondents came from unchurched backgrounds.

PNW EVANGELICAL CHURCHES

Statistics clearly indicate the secular nature of the PNW culture compared with other regions (Silk and Walsh 2008). Thus, we were interested in whether PNW evangelicals experience the region in this way. The interview responses made it clear that evangelicals are aware of the secular PNW culture. Respondents in 22 of the 24 churches (roughly 92 percent) used terms such as “unchurched or secular” (36 respondents) and/or “liberal or libertarian” (32 respondents) to

TABLE 1 Descriptive Statistics, Percentages by Group for Socio-demographic Variables

Variables	Liberals	Evangelicals
Sex		
Female	53.10	40.27
Male	46.90	59.73
Total	100.00	100.00
Education		
Secular college	41.38	41.95
Christian college	6.90	11.74
Secular grad.	40.69	9.40
Christian grad.	14.38	6.38
Total	88.97	69.47
State		
Oregon	51.72	48.66
Washington	48.28	51.34
Total	100.00	100.00
Religious upbringing		
Evangelical (non-Pent.)	13.10	34.90
Mainline Protestant	55.86	17.45
Pentecostal	1.38	6.04
Roman Catholic	9.66	12.09
Unchurched	7.59	7.72
Total ^a	87.59	79.20
N	145	298

^aTotal does not reach 100 percent due to nonresponse.

Note: Variable definitions for choice variables: Secular college = percent of respondents who received a Bachelor's degree from a nonreligious college or university; Christian college = percent of respondents who received a Bachelor's degree from a four-year Christian college or university; Secular grad. = percent of respondents who received a graduate degree from a nonreligious college; Christian grad. = percent of respondents who received a graduate degree from a Christian college.

describe the PNW culture.⁷ A male respondent from a suburban Seattle mega-church describes this: "It's secular. It's unchurched. It's liberal. Washington State is either the number one or number two, depending on the statistics, between Washington and Oregon, as the most unchurched state in the nation."

When asked how their faith relates to the PNW culture, 93 percent of respondents identified feeling some form of tension (i.e., distinction, separation,

⁷In one of the churches where these terms were not used, a respondent noted that the particular suburban community she lived in was more religious than other areas of Oregon. Thus, more local conditions may help explain why respondents in this church did not describe the PNW in the same way as the majority of the churches.

and/or antagonism), which ranged from merely feeling different to feeling persecuted. A male member of an urban nondenominational Portland church identified a separation between his conservative religious values, and the values of the unchurched PNW. Similarly, a female respondent from an urban nondenominational Seattle church described “feeling like a minority.” She said, “I’m so different than everybody else and I’m in conflict.” A senior pastor at an urban Presbyterian Seattle church identified the liberal, “unchurched climate” as a “cultural current” moving against evangelicals that “feels like a battle.” One respondent’s statement exemplifies this:

We definitely have a culture clash between the Evangelical church and the general populace in this area. In this area we seem to have a lot of, for lack of a better word, liberals, who believe that women should have the right to choose to abort their babies and that homosexuals should have the right to marry. [. . .] And if you disagree with that you’re labeled a fanatic (Male attendee, rural nondenominational Portland church).

A male attendee of a suburban Baptist Seattle church identified a “strong,” “angry,” “anti-Christian, anti-conservative bias in Seattle.” If you’re evangelical in Seattle, one male attendee of an urban nondenominational megachurch noted, you are more likely to be “spat upon, looked down upon, dismissed, thought of in all kinds of unflattering terms.” The overarching sentiment of these interviews is one of a culture clash, to varying degrees, between evangelicals and the culture of the PNW.

For evangelicals, the heart of this culture clash is a belief that the PNW promotes immorality. For example, one male attendee of an urban nondenominational Seattle megachurch said, “Seattle is hell, we need to work within this pit before we even focus on the other pits.” For them, “this pit” of immorality includes homosexuality, infidelity, and abortion. While respondents across all the churches brought up these topics generally, respondents in 63 percent of the churches discussed these issues in terms of the PNW in particular. Speaking in regards to these topics, a male attendee of a suburban nondenominational Seattle church stated:

The [liberal] churches in Seattle condone many of these things we don’t approve of, with their gay pastors and that sort of thing. And our culture compared to Christianity obviously there’s a huge gap, but yet what I’ve learned too is that I don’t expect the culture to agree with me. That’s why we’re different and we’re chosen. So when odd things happen and there’s gay parades and stuff, which I’ve seen passing by, and I look and our governor is waving from a car or something, I look at it and I don’t get angry because my expectations for them really are nonexistent. If they don’t have the same beliefs that I do, why would I think or expect them to behave differently.

Here the respondent describes a conflict between his beliefs, particularly those regarding homosexuality, and the PNW culture, which he claims is supported by liberal Seattle churches and the governor. A male attendee of a rural Foursquare Portland church noted that in the PNW culture, where homosexuality is

accepted, it is a challenge to be against homosexuality, while still demonstrating love toward homosexuals:

So I think the challenge in the Northwest especially is keeping what the real heart of Christianity is. So things like homosexuality, which the bible says is totally wrong, things like that, yeah, we don't do any gay bashing, but we understand that's a sin. And we're more than happy to be with gays and counsel them and have them as friends and that's not a problem, that's not a conflict with our religion any different than any other sin.

Although the evangelicals in this study identified homosexuality, abortion, and infidelity as sins accepted by the PNW culture, they asserted that these sins were no worse than any others and that they loved all sinners.

The topic of same-sex marriage was an especially salient issue as initiatives against gay marriage were being voted on in Oregon and Washington during the time period of this study. It was clearly a watershed moment for these evangelical churches:

In Washington and Oregon we have been dealing with same-sex marriage. We don't approach this as a political agenda. We approach this as a doctrinal issue that we feel strong about, about preserving the traditional view of marriage (Female attendee, suburban nondenominational Portland church).

On several occasions, evangelicals expressed strong feelings of political and social oppression by the PNW's "liberal agenda," attacking traditional marriage and forcing them to accept the "gay lifestyle."

Pastors and lay leaders across six churches (46 percent of the Seattle churches) in this study coordinated and led an event—May Day for Marriage—that brought evangelicals together to hear speeches supporting traditional marriage. It was estimated that around 20,000 people attended the event at Safeco Field in Seattle in 2004. Protestors stood outside Safeco Field and six respondents who participated in this event expressed feeling attacked for their beliefs as they entered the stadium. They noted that this was the first time they had experienced hate speech against them: "The May Day for Marriage thing was the first time [for me] feeling hated. [. . .] I didn't have my so-called right to go in and express my beliefs and my faith because somebody was attacking me for that" (Female, suburban Seattle megachurch). A senior pastor of a suburban nondenominational Seattle church similarly described how, in front of his children, he was called "narrow minded, bigoted, [and] intolerant" by "homosexuals who were lining Safeco Field." These evangelicals saw this as a form of secular and liberal hypocrisy, as Seattleites, known for being tolerant and supporting free speech, were intolerant of their free speech. In Portland, three of the churches in this study also rallied against same-sex marriage by distributing petitions supporting the inclusion of a "sanctity of marriage" Oregon constitutional amendment on the election ballot.

Outside of concerns regarding perceived immorality, respondents in 11 churches identified secular activities prevalent in the PNW culture that compete and/or conflict with institutionalized religious practices. Sports and other outside recreational activities were the most commonly cited activities. A male respondent from a suburban Seattle nondenominational church exemplifies this sentiment: “I think part of it, especially in the Northwest, is liberalism has taken on a turn not only from the political views, but from everything we do. We [PNWers] are involved in sports. [. . .] We got recreation, liberalism has been serving me first and doing what I want.” Respondents from three churches noted that youth sporting events are often held on Sunday mornings with no consideration for church services:

This is one of the first towns I've ever lived in that will promote children's soccer leagues on Sunday, during church times. So literally saying, if you're going to play in our team, in our league, you won't go to church on Sunday morning (Senior pastor, suburban nondenominational Portland church).

One respondent stated that in other regions of the country “in the Bible Belt and in the Midwest there would still be a respect amongst the sports organizers for Sunday morning,” but that does not exist “in the Northwest [where] anytime on the weekend is fair game” (Male attendee, suburban Baptist Seattle church). Three respondents in different churches mentioned this was something in which many families with children struggled—whether to miss church so that their children could participate in sports.

Respondents in six churches identified the beautiful PNW environment as competing with religious activities: “Competition is one of the greatest things here in the Northwest, there's always something else to do. You know, go to the mountains, go and ski, go to the coast, go camping, the list goes on and on” (Senior pastor, suburban nondenominational Portland megachurch). One male respondent from a suburban Baptist Seattle church said that in Seattle there is “a huge boating community and you're boating on the weekend. You're not thinking about church as a part of the weekend. You're saying church, that means I have to tie my boat back up.” Another man in this focus group continued this thought: “Actually, they said, this is my church, this is my God. They exchanged God for other gods.” And still another furthered this sentiment: “Or they said, I'm already in heaven. You listen to a lot of people who move up here, because I love the Seattle water, trees, the evergreens, and so I feel I'm in heaven. Well if you're in heaven why do you need to talk to God.” Respondents in these churches described PNWers as worshipping nature and therefore feeling as though they had no need for church:

This is such a beautiful area we live in and quite often I'll say something like, people are worshipping the creation instead of the creator and they don't seem to think that they have a need for the creator (Male attendee, urban Calvary Chapel Seattle church).

Their gods are their fields or going to the golf course or skiing (Male attendee, suburban Baptist Seattle church).

These responses illustrate a “sacralization of nature” (Shibley 2004), which these evangelicals felt competed with religious institutions.

Evangelicals also expressed tension with what they identified as the overall spirit of the PNW—independent, individualistic, and libertarian. This sentiment was expressed by respondents in eight churches. For example, a female respondent who attends a suburban nondenominational Seattle megachurch said:

It almost hits you in the face when you get here at first, is the kind of spirit of independence. It's just because this area has been so isolated and so far from everything historically, you know, that the people, we're Washington and we'll just figure it out. And we do. But because of that you just have this, don't anybody tell me what to think [mentality], thank you very much, I'll figure it out for myself.

The understanding of “I don’t bother you, you don’t bother me” makes it harder for evangelicals to discuss their faith and evangelize the population. One senior pastor identified this independent spirit as one of the reasons why the PNW is unchurched:

There is a give me my 640 acres and get out of my face spirit here. And it's not a joining culture, in contrast to some of our friends who pastor churches in the Bible Belt or other places where it's part of the culture that you belong, you participate. There is not that climate in the Northwest (Senior pastor, rural nondenominational Portland church).

At the same time, five respondents from different churches identified positive aspects of this spirit, particularly its “live and let live” mentality. For example, a female respondent from a suburban Seattle Baptist church said: “One of the things that is nice about the Northwest is that [. . .] most people are content for me to be who I am and I’m content for them to make their choices and be who they are. So there’s very much of a live and let live philosophy that I think helps us.” One urban nondenominational Portland church felt that they reflected the “authentic” spirit of the PNW (i.e., being who you are without pretense): “People are real here. They’ll tell you what they think. [. . .] We’re real and that part of the Northwest culture really resonates I think with [church’s name].” Thus, evangelicals express both an oppositional as well as a cooperative relationship with this aspect of PNW culture.

While general feelings of distinction from and tension with the PNW culture permeated the interviews, only 15 percent of evangelicals identified feeling directly oppressed and persecuted by it (i.e., a strongly oppositional relationship). Instead, the majority of the churches saw the unchurched, open religious market of the PNW as an opportunity for evangelism (respondents in 14 churches mentioned this). Over and over again, ministers and laypeople voiced the ways in which the PNW was a mission field: “As believers we have to look at

this whole liberal community here in Seattle more as an opportunity than as a hardship” (Female attendee, suburban nondenominational Seattle church). As one minister said, “If you wanted to encapsulate what this church wants to be about, it’s making God famous in the city of Seattle” (Senior pastor, urban nondenominational Seattle megachurch). In fact, seven senior pastors mentioned that they chose to pastor a church in the PNW specifically because they saw it as a mission field:

Just praying for God’s direction and realized that this Northwest is one of the most unchurched areas of the US and I felt like God was calling us to come home. You want to go where the harvest is ripe (Senior pastor, suburban nondenominational Seattle church).

I mean, why go to Kansas City, they don’t need a missionary in Kansas City. [. . .] If you’re going to really influence the kingdom of God, what better place to be than [town’s name] (Senior pastor, suburban Nazarene Portland church).

One of these pastors compared evangelizing to selling products: just as a sales person does not want to sell products in a saturated area, but rather, in an untapped market, so too evangelicals should want to missionize in unchurched areas (i.e., the PNW). In these 14 churches, evangelicals enthusiastically discussed the ambition to “win” the PNW for Christ: “It’s kind of fun in a sense in that as a Christian you have a neat opportunity to share with those other people too” (Female, suburban nondenominational Portland church). Consistently, they spoke of evangelizing the “unsaved” and churching the “unchurched.” One female respondent from an urban nondenominational Seattle megachurch described how she appreciated the unchurched PNW because it challenges her to evangelize: “I think it’s great that not everyone here is Christian. That way you can’t become comfortable and sit in your chair and assume that everyone around you is Christian. You’re always on the spot to be accountable for your theology.” In this way, the evangelicals’ reaction to being distinctive in the PNW culture was less about conflict as would be expected by [Stark and Finke \(2000\)](#) and [Smith et al. \(1998\)](#), but more about viewing it as a challenge and an opportunity to evangelize, that is, more of a cooperative, rather than oppositional, relationship.

In pursuit of this aim, churches strategically engaged the culture to attract new members. One senior pastor of an urban nondenominational Portland church said:

When you’re in [an] urban highly unchurched context [. . .] people don’t have to go to church. And they’re definitely not going to go to hear an infomercial about Jesus. So either it’s real and they see it happening or they sleep in. We engage the culture of today and we contextualize the gospel to today’s culture, which means everything from dress to music to issues and style.

These churches are very much a part of the wider trend of “new-paradigm churches” ([Miller 1997](#)) and are a product of the evangelical parachurch

movement. Their services include contemporary worship, individuals are invited to come to services “as they are,” and both congregants and clergy generally dress informally. However, 16 churches in this study distinguished themselves by indicating that they not only engaged the broader culture, but also the *PNW culture* in particular. They identified developing and adopting specific strategies to appeal to PNWers, who, as the quote states, “don’t have to go to church.”

The eight churches that described the PNW as having an “independent spirit,” all identified specific ways they sought to work with this spirit in order to appeal to PNWers. In particular, they noted that PNWers are typically not “joiners” and their free-thinking spirit makes it such that religion cannot be “forced down anybody’s throat” (Female attendee, suburban nondenominational Seattle megachurch). Respondents in these churches identified that direct witnessing typically does not work in the PNW, and instead, they have to evangelize through their behavior, by going out into the community and forming relationships: “And I think because [of] the liberalness of this culture, it has forced us to change how we interact with it by doing community, by doing relationship” (Male attendee, suburban nondenominational Seattle church). One urban nondenominational Seattle church’s new member class specifically teaches individuals how to “interact with the Northwest, which is probably the most liberal of the liberal [areas].” One male respondent described what he learned in this course:

It’s not about trying to explain your point with facts or logic or hitting them over the head with the Bible, it was about living the life that someone could say, that person looks like they’ve got something different and I want what they’ve got. It’s a very real, hands on experiential interaction with the community.

This sentiment was expressed by respondents across all eight churches—that evangelizing to PNWers meant that evangelicals need to “walk the walk” (female attendee, suburban Portland megachurch) by going out into the community and helping people. One male respondent from an urban nondenominational Seattle church summed up this sentiment:

[Church name] is not very evangelical in the general sense of evangelicals. They are a church that just wants to reach out and bring people in, not by telling them about Jesus and going out and whacking them over the head with the Bible, but just by going out and helping the school next door build their new playground. Going out and washing cars in the neighborhood. We’re just here. We’re your neighbors. And I think that works in Seattle. And I think that’s hurt other churches in that they don’t do that well.

In this quote, and across these eight churches, the respondents highlighted how this nontraditional, indirect evangelism strategy contributed to their church’s success in this region.

There are a variety of other ways that churches attempted to appeal to PNWers as well as to meet the needs of their own members, who themselves are

PNWers. The senior pastor of an urban nondenominational Seattle church provides an example of this:

One of the reasons I think [church's name] has been so successful is because it really is culturally relevant. One of the things we have in Seattle that's very popular is the outdoors and climbing and hiking. We have a wilderness ministry. We have an arts ministry. We have a music ministry.

Six churches have ministries or resources directed toward the environment and outside recreation, such as wilderness ministries, walking trails, and community gardens. Four churches have art ministries (outside of church worship ministries), one of which even has a space for art shows that they hold for their members and the community. An urban Seattle nondenominational congregation has an elaborate outreach program in the arts, which, while using modern themes, always identifies the “source” of human creativity as coming from “God in Christ.” Two congregations identified participating in local arts and music festivals to increase awareness of their churches. One congregation had an outreach program targeting the educated, literary population of the PNW by having a morning speaker series at bookstores: “They have Christian speakers come in and it’s not advertised as a Christian speaker, but they catch the morning Starbucks early morning risers, coffee people that go to Border’s bookstores and hang out” (Female attendee, suburban Portland megachurch). Respondents in four churches expressed the importance of coffee in the PNW and the idea that coffee and worship were expected in PNW evangelical churches. Coffee, as one evangelical from a suburban Seattle nondenominational church put it, is the “sacrament of the PNW, why not have it in the sanctuary?” We noticed that 18 churches had espresso stands or coffee cafes in their buildings and it was common, and perhaps the norm, for individuals to bring coffee into the services. Thus while the incorporation of coffee into their buildings and services may have been strategic for some of the churches, for others it seemed to be more of an unconscious reflection of the PNW culture.

While evangelicals are often thought of as in conflict with their surroundings, these interviews suggest that their relationship with the PNW environment is more complicated, having both oppositional and cooperative aspects. PNW liberal Protestants have a similar nuanced relationship in which they experience both compatibility and tension with the PNW culture.

PNW LIBERAL PROTESTANT CHURCHES

Like the evangelicals, the liberal Protestants also identified the PNW as secular, unchurched, and/or liberal; these terms were used in all 10 of the liberal churches. However, these characteristics were more taken-for-granted amongst the liberal Protestants and were mentioned less frequently compared with the evangelicals (21 liberal Protestant respondents used these terms). When the respondents used the term “liberal” to describe the PNW, it was typically used in

a more positive manner as a reflection of what the respondents themselves believe. For example, a female attendee of a suburban Presbyterian Portland church said: "Being a liberal Christian in Portland or the Northwest is much easier. You connect with people much more easily than you do in some of other parts of the country. We have a lot of friends who are not church people and we can talk about [political] issues." Although the respondent is Christian, she felt that the liberal nature of her religiosity gave her "more in common with the unchurched" population of the PNW. Respondents across all the liberal churches identified more of a positive affinity and cooperative relationship with the liberal environment of the PNW.

The topic of homosexuality and same-sex marriage is one particular area in which all the churches expressed such an affinity. Seven of the 10 congregations were officially designated as welcoming to gays and lesbians also referred to as a "welcoming," "open and affirming," or "reconciling" congregation. The other three churches were welcoming to gays and lesbians in practice, but, two of them could not officially designate themselves as such due to denominational restrictions. All the congregations identified participating in activities, either formally or informally, supporting the civil and political rights of gay men and lesbians in their community, including gay pride parades, marches, and petitions for same-sex marriage legislation. To the extent that they experienced tension, it was more so with their own denominations or evangelicals. For instance, pastors from two congregations were not allowed to perform same-sex marriages due to their denominational affiliation, even when it was legally allowed in their county. One of the senior pastors performed same-sex marriages anyway, and the other, along with her congregation, held receptions for the same-sex couples in their community who had gotten married. Respondents from two congregations also described being picketed due to their support of gays and lesbians by evangelical Baptists. One respondent from an urban United Methodist Portland church recalled picketers screaming insults at her young children as they entered the church. While some evangelical and liberal Protestant respondents shared an experience of being protested against, the liberal Protestant respondents did not view it as a characteristic of the PNW, but rather, of particular conservative religious extremists.

The beliefs of liberal Protestant churches are generally thought to mirror cultural beliefs of egalitarianism and inclusiveness and are therefore typically not considered in tension with the surrounding culture (see [Evans 2003](#) and [Wellman 2002](#) for notable studies of distinct, strong liberal religious identities). Instead, evangelical or theologically conservative religious groups are usually examined as those in tension and/or conflict with their surroundings ([Smith et al. 1998](#); [Stark and Finke 2000](#)). While the liberal Protestants in this study do tend to agree with the liberal and political values of the PNW and do express a cooperative affinity with them, they also experienced tension with the PNW culture.

Like the evangelicals, liberal Protestants expressed tension with the independent spirit of the PNW, the lack of institutional/cultural support for religion, and the competition with recreational outside activities. Respondents in five churches described a rampant individualistic, independent, libertarian spirit in the PNW. A male senior pastor of a suburban Episcopal Seattle Church described it as “the last bit of the west and we don’t need you to tell us what to do kind of thing.” Another described it as “very libertarian;” PNWers “will say, I’m spiritual without being religious, and what they mean is, I’m spiritual, but I don’t like all that communal stuff” (Female senior pastor, urban Episcopal Portland church). Respondents in these five churches discussed an incongruity between the individualistic PNW culture and the communal spirit of liberal churches. The male senior pastor of an urban United Methodist Portland church suggested that churches thrive in the Bible Belt and other places, because there is a sense of community there, which does not exist in the PNW: “[The] biggest cultural idol that we have to fight is individualism. The church is imbued with community [. . .] and you can’t be individual and be a Christian, you have to be part of a community of faith.” Another senior pastor noted a struggle for her church was helping individuals “understand what is a very radical notion of communitarianism at the heart of Anglicanism, which is, we live in community with one another” (female, urban Episcopal Portland church).

The question then for these churches is how to reach out to PNWers who are seeking spiritual experiences but not within religious institutions. The senior pastor of an urban Episcopal Portland church explained, “what the church needs to do is use the libertarian spirit to invite people in.” One way her congregation did this was by having an interfaith ministry for spiritual development directed toward those who say they are spiritual but not religious. She noted that this draws people in who otherwise would have “never, ever entertained the notion of being part of the church.” Fifty percent of the liberal churches offered some form of interfaith or spiritual (but not religious) ministry for that purpose. These included specific centers, retreats, groups, seminars, and even Buddhist meditation classes.

Other liberal Protestants complained about there not being any set aside “sacred space” for institutionalized religion in the PNW culture. Respondents across five churches expressed the lack of institutional and cultural support for religion. For example, one interviewee compared the PNW with the South and noted that the latter supports going to church on Sundays:

In the south [. . .], you were supposed to go to church so you went. I think this is a whole different place. I was shocked when we moved here and I found out that the Boy Scouts held their Christmas tree pickup on a Sunday morning. That never would have happened in the south, they were at church (Female attendee, urban United Methodist Portland church).

One minister concurs and described how Sunday is not considered a special day in the PNW:

There's a really strong unchurched ethos. You see it if you try to do anything in colleges or sports, Sunday is just another day of the week. There's no sense that maybe we should do it Sunday afternoon so people can go to church (Female senior pastor, urban United Church of Christ Portland church).

The lack of institutional support for congregational religion was also expressed by two liberal pastors who mentioned that there are no special “perks” from the community for clergy, such as automatic memberships in athletic or entertainment clubs, like there are in other regions. Instead, clergy are met with indifference. Thus, like the evangelicals, the lack of support for institutionalized religion in PNW culture created tension for some of the liberal Protestant respondents and churches.

Liberal Protestants also mentioned the pervasive “nature religion” of the PNW as a challenge. One male pastor of an urban Seattle church described the pull of the natural beauty of the PNW: “There is something about the combination of water and mountains that’s astounding. You can’t live here and not have a sense that you’re in the presence of something infinitely greater than anything we can imagine.” Respondents in 50 percent of the liberal churches expressed some frustration over this as though they were in competition with nature for members. For example, a male respondent from a suburban Episcopal Seattle church said, “Some people I have invited [to come to church] said that they go hiking in the mountains and the trees are their religion and their God. [. . .] Here, one might say, Gortex is a religion.” The male senior pastor of a suburban Episcopal Seattle church described this as a type of “personal spirituality,” where individuals experience God “in creation,” “the mountains,” or “on the water.” Yet these respondents also shared the same affinity with the environment. It wasn’t that one shouldn’t experience God through nature, but that a religious community was important as well. The liberal churches in this study reflected the PNW’s commitment to the environment—90 percent of them had some form of eco-justice ministries or groups. The one church that did not have a specific environmental ministry, did tout that it has a “green building.” Thus, in regards to the environment, liberal Protestants experience both tension and affinity with the PNW culture.

In area of tension that distinguishes the liberal Protestants from the evangelicals was their complaint that PNWers assume Christian means evangelical, fundamentalist, and/or politically conservative. Respondents across five churches expressed this complaint. As a result, some of them simply kept their religious affiliation to themselves. Two respondents in particular mentioned that they always use the word “liberal” in front of Christian when they identify themselves to PNWers so as to not be confused with evangelicals. One female respondent from a suburban Presbyterian Portland church described how PNWers are unaware of liberal Christians and only know Christians as evangelicals. One focus group in an urban Congregational Portland church highlighted how part of the problem is that the local media, when it covers stories involving religious

communities, interviews the two largest evangelical churches in town. One man in this group objected to how “evangelical conservative Christians in this community tend to speak for us.” Respondents in this focus group emphasized the importance of social service activities in the community as a means to help others while increasing awareness of liberal Christianity.

Like the evangelicals, liberal Protestants also have an appreciation for arts and music that mirrors the broader PNW culture. Seventy percent of the churches have some form of art ministry, which varies in its implementation, ranging from art galleries, festivals, and classes to using art as a means of reaching homeless youth. Three churches mentioned how concerts and art ministries were a main way they attract new members. These events connect with the PNW’s appreciation of the arts, while emphasizing how “the spirit works through human being’s creativity” (Female senior pastor, suburban Presbyterian Portland church) and moves “through the music and the arts” (Female senior pastor, urban Episcopal Portland church).

While the liberal Protestant churches emphasized coffee less than the evangelical churches, two of the churches offer brewed and/or packaged fair-trade (or better-than fair-trade) coffee for donations, which then go to a particular social service cause; one of the churches gives a percentage of the money back to the farmers from whence the coffee came. These churches view these ministries as a way to derive benefit from the coffee culture of the PNW—allowing their members to drink coffee in a morally responsible manner, while at the same time supporting causes in which they believe.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Tension, a core concept in several major theories of religious commitment (i.e., Iannaccone 1994; Smith et al. 1998; Stark and Finke 2000), is theorized to be a function of the relationship of both the beliefs and practices of a religious group and its environment(s). Yet the environment—what it is, what in it contributes to generating tension, and what level it is on (e.g., city, regional, national, and so on)—has been overlooked in the literature. This paper contributes to addressing this gap in the literature by identifying these features in one particular regional environment—the PNW. Unlike past studies, which identified tension based on conservative theology, we argued that *both* evangelical and liberal Protestant churches would experience tension with the PNW culture, due to its unchurched and secular nature. While these religious groups are usually placed at opposite ends of the religious tension spectrum, they shared several tensions with the PNW culture. They both identified the PNW as individualistic, lacking institutional and cultural support for religion, emphasizing nature over institutionalized religion, and offering alternative secular recreational activities that compete with religion. This highlights how tension cannot be attributed to a religious group solely based on its religious tradition, but must

be identified by characteristics of the religious group *and* its environment. In this way, tension is not an individual property of religious groups or environments, but is a dyadic property that exists only in the relation between the two. As such, it is necessary for future research on religious tension to consider both.

Theories of religious commitment also tend to emphasize tension as an antagonistic or embattled relationship. Too often, in previous research on conservative religions, it is assumed that they will necessarily be in opposition to their environment, which is generalized as generically “liberal.” Our research has shown that this taken for granted assumption is misleading at best, since the majority of respondents did not feel directly persecuted or oppressed, but instead saw the secular PNW as an opportunity. For liberal Protestants this meant having the chance to reach out to spiritual, but not traditionally religious, PNWers, whereas evangelicals saw the secular PNW as opening up opportunities for evangelizing. Toward these ends, both religious groups adapted their churches and outreach strategies to match the PNW culture in an effort to become more attractive. In this way, they exhibited cooperative responses to the PNW culture, which demonstrates that tension is not always experienced as oppositional. Thus, by neglecting to consider how tension can lead to cooperative relationships, past research has missed how religious groups may respond positively to tension with their local environments. Because tension is dyadic and relational, identifying how religious groups view their relationship with their environment (i.e., oppositional, cooperative, or both) is vital for understanding how they experience and respond to tension.

While incorporating the broader culture into religious services and ministries is a growing trend in American evangelicalism (Miller 1997; Sargeant 2000), many of the churches in this study described these accommodations specifically in terms of them appealing to the *PNW culture*. Despite their vast theological differences, evangelical and liberal Protestants in this study experienced many of the same tensions with the PNW culture and responded similarly—focusing on outreach through forming relationships in the community and offering programs that appeal to PNWers, such as environmental and artistic ministries. Some of these churches even identified how their outreach techniques were nontraditional for their denomination or religious tradition, but were necessary and effective in the PNW. This, in itself, may be a reflection of residing in a regional culture that lacks a religious institutional structure, which thereby allows them to explore ministries and outreach methods that fit their environment and members. In terms of these adapted strategies and ministries specifically, PNW evangelical and liberal Protestants may be more similar to each other than to their religious tradition counterparts in other regions. The fact that religious groups in two different traditions responded to and were shaped by their environment in similar ways highlights the importance of place. Thus, future research, we argue, must investigate how church adaptations reflect the particular *local* place in which the church resides, not just the broader culture, and how variability within religious traditions may be largely the result of local environmental

influence. In this way, the geography of place and locale must become critical features in the future study of religious cultures (see Wilford 2012, for an excellent recent example).

Finally, it is indispensable for both theoretical and empirical approaches in the study of religious organizations not to overlook how the religious experiences of individuals are different due to the local environments in which they reside. Because “everyday, lived religion—religion as the myriad cultural expressions of people as they move, grow, marry, die, and try to make sense of it all—depends crucially on place to constitute what it is” (Williams 2004:195). We suggest that the generalized assumptions about the American religious environment have distorted how tension has been theorized and explained in the past. The findings of our study demand that future studies of religious organizations take care to more fully understand the relation of religion and place as a crucial way to describe and explain religious organizations and their cultures. We would go so far as to say, the study of religion without the understanding of place is like describing fish without water—the two can neither exist nor be understood without the other.

FUNDING

This research was supported by the Louisville Institute.

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