

Local color: American religion, region by region

by [Nancy Ammerman](#) in the [November 1, 2005](#) issue

Many of us are fond of referring to “American religion,” as if that were a thing to be described. But anyone who has spent much time on the ground (or in churches) knows that there are lots of ways in which that term has to be modified, and one of the most significant modifiers is regional. I have lived in six of the eight regions identified in the Religion by Region series, and who I am religiously, and who people think I am, has varied enormously according to where I was living.

As a kid in Missouri, I was a Baptist, and that identity said not only that I belonged to an important church but that I was on the right side of the great eternal divide, ready to defend my salvation against the other contenders around me. When my family moved to Arizona, I joined the tail end of the white evangelizers who hoped to bring faith and education to the Native American and Mexican laborer population that surrounded us. In southern California, our next stop, people thought we were from Texas and just figured we were one more in a trail of exotic breeds that seemed to flourish on the Pacific shores. What they didn’t know was that Southern Baptists and other evangelicals were becoming an institutional force to be reckoned with.

More than a decade later, when I was a pastor’s wife on the other coast, the people who heard “southern” and “Baptist” seemed to assume that meant “snake handler” and closed the door as quickly as possible. Then, when we actually moved to the South, we experienced the cognitive dissonance of being assumed to be part of the irresistible evangelical mainstream while practicing a form of Baptist life that eventually got our church kicked out of the denomination.

Now I live in New England, and I’m an American Baptist—part of the “mainline,” but we’re anything but mainstream and powerful. People are polite about our religious identity, but no one assumes that our church will make the news. The pages of our local paper are largely reserved for the doings of the Roman Catholic Church.

Who makes the news—and why and how—is part of the story this series seeks to tell. In part, it is an attempt to educate the public, including reporters, on the unique religious history and ecology of America’s regions. With funding from the Lilly Endowment, the Leonard E. Greenberg Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life at Trinity College in Hartford undertook the massive task of assembling scholars and data and producing eight books, each containing both demographic overviews and focused essays on the features that distinguish each region’s religious life. Mark Silk and Andrew Walsh, the center’s director and associate director, persuaded an impressive array of historians, sociologists and religion scholars to contribute their formidable insight.

As with any edited collection, some chapters are better than others, but on balance, there is plenty here to reward readers who want a closer look at the role of religion in the particular places that make up this extremely varied nation. Each volume includes introductions and conclusions that draw out common regional themes. There is also a general overview chapter that presents the necessary numbers—from ethnic and educational patterns to just how many Baptists or Catholics or, for that matter, Sikhs and Muslims there are in the U.S. The remaining chapters address the distinct practices and histories of the dominant groups and include a variety of essays that take up such topics as the roles of southern religious women, patterns of new religious immigration, and even the religious urban geography of Chicago. Taken together, they constitute an encyclopedic introduction to the myriad stories that make up “American religion.”

The quality of this team of authors and editors was essential, because the statistical data from which they had to work simply cannot tell the whole story. The absence of a national religious census in the U.S. means that we are always confined to filling in numerical gaps with educated guesswork. Each of the sources used here provides a wealth of information, but each has significant limits as well—and the three do not overlap perfectly. The North American Religion Atlas (NARA) depends on the 2000 membership numbers compiled by the Glenmary Research Center (a decennial project undertaken since 1950). For many groups, these numbers provide a fairly accurate county-by-county picture, but to the extent that a group provided sketchy data (lots of round numbers always raise questions) or no data at all, these “adherent” numbers fail to reflect the actual religious composition of a given area.

For instance, Samuel Hill argues convincingly that many of the religions that thrive in Appalachia are precisely the sort that don’t look kindly on anyone who wants to

count them. The high number of presumed “nonadherents” in those counties distorts the picture.

In a different way, Kathleen Flake reminds us that a lot of the people not on the rolls of the local Latter-day Saints ward are probably nevertheless Mormon—just not in good enough standing to be counted. A nonadherent in either of these places is a very different thing from the nonadherent in the Pacific Northwest whose family has perhaps been unaffiliated with organized religion for generations. Just how many real nonadherents there are is something we simply cannot know.

Some of those difficulties are overcome with the second data source this series uses, the American Religious Identification Survey. In this survey people get to say for themselves what they think they are. It uses a sample of the population, but a very large one, so that members of small religious groups actually do show up (as they often do not in smaller national surveys). The problem with asking people to name themselves, however, is that so many of them don’t provide very precise answers (“just Christian,” for example).

And once you have a list of all those small groups, how on earth do you make sense of it? The result is often catch-all categories like “Baptist” (which includes both white and black Baptists) and “Christian unspecified.” Neither designation tells us very much about the religious life of the people who are thus categorized (over a quarter of the population), nor does either overlap with the denominational categories used in the NARA. The authors of these books have worked heroically with the limitations of these data, using their own historical and cultural insights to make sense of the gaps.

The third source on which all the books rely is political polling by the Bliss Center at the University of Akron. Using national surveys done in 1992, 1996 and 2000, the authors have been able to describe some of the moral and political attitudes of the various religious groups in each region. From this we learn, for instance, that the liberal majority in the Pacific is composed of low-commitment mainliners, Catholics, other Christians, non-Christians and secularists. In New England, however, the liberal majority includes high-commitment Catholics and African-American and mainline Protestants, along with the non-Christians and secularists. Those two observations provide some interesting hints about how religion and politics might intersect differently in different regions, but the Bliss Center data lend themselves far better to the detailed statistical analysis one might find in a scholarly journal than to the

broad-brush description these books are meant to provide.

The attempt to show how religion intersects with regional and local politics is more convincing in the specific cases various authors cite. The accommodation of American religious pluralism takes very local form, for instance. Whether rock climbers should have access to Wyoming's Devil's Tower is just one of many questions surrounding Native American sacred sites. Whether Hindus should be able to build a temple outside Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, is one local variation on the difficulties facing new and unfamiliar groups who want to construct religious buildings.

Similarly, clashes along the church-state boundary are shaped by the particular religious makeup of the region—as when the LDS Church attempted to regulate what could be said and distributed on the streets near Salt Lake City's Temple Square, or when a state judge in Alabama decided to display the Ten Commandments outside his courthouse. The way religion and politics mix often takes on local colors.

But just as often, local efforts are part of a much bigger picture and shaped by outside players along with local ones. The Nevada Test Site is the focus for religiously based national public action, for instance, and struggles over gay rights and abortion are endemic everywhere. The latter struggles almost always call out the particular local mix of religious partisans, but rhetoric and tactics are remarkably similar whether the venue is Phoenix or Pittsburgh.

Does the influence ever go the other way—from regional to national? Randall Balmer argues that the Middle Atlantic states gave us our patterns for dealing with the religious pluralism we face today. "Real liberty of worship in the American republic probably owes more to the fact that William Penn's 'Holy Experiment' worked than to any theory of the separation of church and state," he writes. The region remains a remarkable setting where a plurality of Catholics is joined by nearly half the nation's Jews, a full array of Protestants, and more representatives of Islam and various Eastern religions than any other region save the Pacific. Bowne Street, in Queens, has become an iconic territory, with members of more than 40 congregations of immense variety jostling for parking places.

In contrast to the Middle Atlantic's welcoming of a certain religious and cultural chaos, the South has more recently urged a more "properly ordered" way upon the

nation. Paul Harvey argues that we largely have the South to thank for the rise of the religious right to national strength. Southern white evangelicals, now overwhelmingly Republican, are the vanguard of the culture war, defending their view of a properly ordered American way of life.

The irony of the South, of course, is that it could give the nation such different Baptist preachers as Martin Luther King Jr. and Jerry Falwell. What Andrew Manis calls the South's second "civil religion" has been equally influential on the national stage. Home to perhaps a quarter of the population in much of the South, African-American churches have provided the incubator in which a distinct religious-political vision of equality and justice has been nurtured.

The South is, of course, one of our most distinct regions, but even there the boundaries are not as clear as we might imagine. Only in New England does the sense of regional identity coincide with the geographical boundaries assigned to it.

One of the most interesting aspects of the portraits presented in these volumes is the way they cast doubt on the organizing scheme they are working with. Even in New England, as Stephen Prothero points out, it's hard to relate the densely populated and religiously diverse Fairfield County in Connecticut to Catholic and Jewish Boston and to unchurched and remote communities in the North Country. Does Florida really belong in the South, with its Catholic and Jewish southern half? After describing the differences between Florida and Appalachia, Samuel Hill concludes, "Neither . . . is typically southern, [but] they are nearer to being that than anything else."

Sometimes the blurring is around the edges, as when Phoenix starts to look more like L.A. than like Santa Fe or when northern Missouri looks more like the Midwest than like the "Southern Crossroads" that its southern half fits into, or when Maryland sits at the intersection of the Middle Atlantic to its north and the South on the other side.

Other regions, such as the "Mountain West," really are sets of distinct subregions—the Catholic and Native American heartland of Arizona and New Mexico, the Mormon Zion of Utah and southern Idaho, and the untamed mountain frontiers of northern Idaho, Montana, Wyoming and Colorado, where people with no religious preference compete with off-beat religious entrepreneurs seeking just this sort of isolation. Sometimes geography matters.

And so does history, nowhere more so than in that Mormon Zion. Nowhere else in the U.S. is something so close to a religious establishment still in place. LDS theology, linking spiritual and temporal governance, and the geography and history of Mormon settlement have created a combination of numerical and cultural dominance that spills into every corner of public life.

The particular migratory patterns of the 18th and 19th centuries show up in other places as well. There is the “German triangle” stretching from Cincinnati to Milwaukee to just west of St. Louis. Here the Catholics are German rather than Irish, the Lutherans aren’t as likely to be Scandinavian, and the UCC churches were probably originally Evangelical and Reformed rather than Congregationalist. The Scandinavians, of course, moved to the upper Midwest, where Lutherans still dominate the culture even where they are not the numerical majority.

One way dominance emerges, here and elsewhere, is through the institutions that religious groups founded as they settled. Whether it is Lutheran social service agencies in the Midwest or Presbyterian parochial schools in New Mexico (founded because the Catholics so dominated the territory’s few public schools) or Jewish philanthropies in New York or the ubiquitous Catholic hospitals and Protestant colleges throughout the land, religions have provided much of the social (and financial) capital for building local communities. These books helpfully excavate that history.

They also often tell the stories of the odd religious pockets that interrupt the regional landscape. There are Lutheran counties in the Carolinas and Virginia, for instance, and communities of “converso” Jews in New Mexico. The Dutch Reformed populate Grand Rapids. Various Anabaptist groups created colonies from Pennsylvania to the Great Plains.

Then there are the Methodists—present in at least small numbers almost everywhere, and often the second- or third-largest group (rarely number one). Even in the South, the proportion of Methodists trails behind that of white Baptists—7 percent as opposed to 24 percent. Only in the Midwest—especially in a swath from Ohio to Kansas—can one see a distinct Methodist stamp on the culture, what Mark Noll calls their faithful self-discipline and effective construction of stable communities.

Today, of course, the landscape is also being reconfigured by new religious groups. One of the significant contributions of this series is its attention to those new arrivals, who are placed consistently into each local picture. Almost everywhere there are new immigrant communities. Latinos are the most numerous, overwhelming Catholic parishes in Texas and California, but also creating dozens of new Protestant congregations and spreading out far from these traditional destinations. While Eastern religions are strongest on the West Coast, where Asian immigration is strongest, Hindus, Buddhists and other groups are now found in sufficient numbers throughout the country to establish local temples and schools.

They, in turn, are shaped both by the transnational networks that sustain the community and by the local context itself. As Raymond Brady Williams writes, “Muslims in Chicago mosques represent a constellation of evolving ethnicities different from those experienced by any of the participants prior to migration and more diverse than anywhere outside of Mecca during the Hajj.” As immigrants change each region’s character, the region will shape them as well.

Just as each region is shaped by these new arrivals, it is also shaped by some of the oldest, namely Native Americans. These volumes provide consistent reminders that the earliest religions were those of the indigenous peoples. Whether it involves a memorial in Little Rock, Arkansas, to a victim of the Trail of Tears, the Hawaiian tradition of *pono* (righteousness and balance), California New Age groups borrowing Indian rituals or New Mexico tribes arguing for the return of their sacred sites, the story of regional religious culture has to acknowledge these rich (and often contentious) roots.

We also have to acknowledge that irreligion is an integral part of American culture, in some regions more than others. The Pacific Northwest is dubbed the “none zone” to highlight the fact that barely one third of its population shows up on the membership rolls of any of the groups that reported to NARA. As Patricia Killen notes, the region “has pretty much always been this way.” It is simply normal *not* to go to church. Even California is considerably more “churched,” though religious identification and loyalty tend to be very fluid in that state.

In both regions, however, there is a perhaps surprising and growing presence of evangelical and Pentecostal traditions. The Azusa Street revival of 1906 has been followed by a succession of southern California evangelical innovations, from those of Aimee Semple McPherson and Robert Schuller to the Vineyard and Calvary Chapel

churches. Even in the Pacific Northwest, members of independent evangelical churches likely account for a substantial portion of those people who weren't otherwise counted as adherents in the NARA survey. As James Wellman points out, "Evangelical numbers have grown 32 percent in the last decade in Washington, and evangelicals now account for 38 percent of the church-affiliated population." Numbers like that may help to explain why conservative political initiatives there meet with success.

All of this doesn't begin to do justice to what these books tell us about religion and region. I haven't discussed the peculiar propensity for religious conflict that seems to be characteristic of the Southern Crossroads or the enormous importance of the Middle Atlantic region to American Jewish life. Nor have I considered the most Catholic of regions, New England. These eight books provide many more stories about what makes each region religiously distinctive. And even after eight books, there is surely more to be said. As much as American religion is "American," it is also local, shaped by the particular history of immigration and economic forces of each place, as well as the particular landscape that often fires religious imaginations. If nothing else, these books remind us that place matters.