
Ecotopian Exceptionalism

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Abstract

Literature on the U.S. Pacific Northwest generally paints the region in exceptionalist stripes, certainly in the deep connection its people maintain with an abundant natural landscape. Is Ecotopia exceptional? We interrogate the empirical basis for this claim, applying results from a mixed-method study of intentional and other communities in Oregon, and a comparative survey situating the Pacific Northwest amidst other regions of the United States. Our focus was on imagined landscapes, both utopian and dystopian, as expressions of late-modern nature spirituality; we situated this emphasis in larger conversations around contemporary spiritual seeking and dwelling. Though there is no doubt that the biographies of those living in intentional communities and in the Pacific Northwest are to some extent unique, our results suggest the need to temper this exceptionalist trope, both as a distinctive category of regional and spiritual identity, and as a salutary model of late-modern living worthy of the inordinate amount of attention it has received.

Keywords

ecotopia, exceptionalism, Pacific Northwest, spirituality, utopia, dystopia

Ecotopia and Late Modern Spirituality

One need look no further than this journal to witness the significance of scholarship on nature religion in late modernity. Yet relatively little attention has been placed on the related ubiquity of utopian and dystopian discourse,¹ of shared dreams of paradise and nightmares of apocalypse where nature often plays a prominent role in both. There is a sizable literature on how nature figures in the contemporary imagination, and some of it has attended specifically to utopic visions (e.g., Smith 1998; de Geus 1999; Plumwood 2002; Pepper 2005), with relatively less focusing on nature dystopias (cf. Buell 2003). Perhaps greater attention to these dream and nightmare worlds may help clarify late-modern ecospirituality in ways that reveal its deeper sources, as well as interpret how it is placed in the mosaic of contemporary landscapes that evidence our desires and fears. In this manner our work seeks to bridge contemporary spiritualities with their attendant geographies.

Our study is based on *Ecotopia*, the fictitious setting of Ernest Callenbach's mid-1970s novel in which a journalist visits the Pacific Northwest decades after its citizens have seceded from the United States in order to practice a decentralized, egalitarian, and overridingly green lifestyle (Callenbach 1975). The journalist, initially condescendingly skeptical, eventually becomes a convert, and indeed his account of Ecotopians' (relatively) peaceful coexistence, ecologically benign practices, and sexually open friendships is a classic example of a blueprint utopia (Jacoby 2005). In particular, Oregon, the focus of our study, has hosted a preponderance of utopian experiments over time (Kopp 2009).

There is another good reason for our interest in the U.S. Pacific Northwest, as cultural notions of sacred nature likely flourish in this region known for its unparalleled landscapes and unchurched population (Killen and Silk 2004; see esp. Shibley 2004). The U.S. Pacific Northwest and southwestern Canada, a region also known as Cascadia, is commonly portrayed in this manner (e.g., Todd 2008). Is nature spirituality and the prominence of nature utopias and dystopias a distinctive, exceptionalist feature of the region, as literature from *Ecotopia* to *Cascadia: The Elusive Utopia* suggest? Our intent is to interrogate the empirical basis for this claim via an original study at the regional and national scale. We do so not only via a mixed-method approach, but by deploying a theoretical orientation that explicitly connects contemporary spirituality to utopian

1. We use the term dystopia broadly here, generally to indicate highly negative scenarios of the future. The term is used in a variety of other ways, such as to describe a degraded societal condition once thought of as utopian.

and dystopian landscapes. Our approach to contemporary spirituality derives from the work of Robert Wuthnow and others. In *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (1998), Wuthnow claimed that a profound shift in American spirituality emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century, from a dwelling- to a seeking-based emphasis. As Wuthnow argues, 'a traditional spirituality of inhabiting sacred places [e.g., houses of worship] has given way to a new spirituality of seeking...people have been losing faith in a metaphysic that can make them feel at home in the universe and...increasingly negotiate among competing glimpses of the sacred, seeking partial knowledge and practical wisdom' (1998: 3).

Wuthnow's argument has been advanced by others as well (e.g., Roof 1993), and may capture the spirit of late-modern times as described by commentators such as Zygmunt Bauman and Richard Sennett. Bauman's *Liquid Modernity* (and string of follow-up Liquid tomes) speaks of seekers as desperate hunters roaming this age of uncertainty (Bauman 2000; see Bauman 2007: Chapter 5); Sennett's *Culture of the New Capitalism* (2006) speaks of a shift from secure but authoritarian dwelling (as in Weber's iron cage) to insecure, rootless seeking following the flexible new economy, and in so doing points out limitations inherent in both alternatives.

Wuthnow's typology may also shed light on ideas of utopia: if beauty necessitates a beholder, utopia lies in the eye of the utopian. The utopian is arguably the prototypical seeker, following Oscar Wilde's famous quote: 'A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail' (1905: 40). It is possible, then, that utopia could be understood as the seeker's idea of dwelling. This is consistent with Sir Thomas More's original notion of utopia as implying both no-place and good-place: the seeker seeks a good-place, but never finds it (i.e., is unable to dwell in it), hence it is a no-place as well. The intimate connection, then, between contemporary spiritualities and geographies is suggested by this emphasis on place and landscape, whether real or imagined, idyllic or nightmarish.

Background: The Rhetoric of Exceptionalism

Exceptionalism has not, of course, been a claim limited to the U.S. Pacific Northwest. The expansive notion of 'American exceptionalism' serves as an umbrella term for a variety of phenomena taken as characteristic of the political and social formations of the United States. Particular strains of exceptionalist discourse highlight the differences between the United

States and other nations, especially the relatively high levels of religious belief and participation that distinguish the United States from other industrialized nations (Demerath 1998; Tiryakian 1993) and the comparative paucity of socialism in the American political landscape (Lipset 1996). The idea that the United States is at some fundamental level an 'elect nation' is the core premise of exceptionalism, a rhetoric that has long animated American political speech.

For the purposes of this essay, two features of exceptionalist discourse are particularly notable. First, exceptionalism typically describes a moral or spiritual quality. Second, though other causes are often entertained, geographic determinism is seldom missing from any list of explanations of exceptionalism. These two ingredients have been combined variously throughout American history to give voice to an ever-evolving moral geography that accounts for how the 'specialness' of the American landscape imbues Americans with special characteristics. This is the logic behind the Puritan 'errand in the wilderness' and Manifest Destiny, both of which yoked the emotive power of natural landscapes to momentous socio-political transformations.

Given how critical exceptionalism has been to the development and articulation of the American national identity, it is unsurprising that it would also be visible at the regional level. Perhaps every region of the United States is unique: Hawaii is extra-continental, the Southwest has a history of Spanish and Mexican rule, etc. During the later decades of the twentieth century, however, the Pacific Northwest has been painted in particularly exceptionalist stripes; in particular, descriptions of the region's uniqueness emphasize the Northwest's low levels of institutional religiosity and its vibrant environmental movement. These two widely cited characteristics of the Pacific Northwest are, moreover, said to be causally interrelated.

The regionalist strain of exceptionalism examined here approaches the Pacific Northwest as an 'exception to exceptionalism': a place where the high levels of religious belonging that differentiate the United States from Europe are notably absent. From this view, the Pacific Northwest is a place in which the characteristically American project of civilizing the wilderness with religious zeal is upended in favor of irreligiosity and anti-establishment spiritualities. Scholars attentive to the region have called it 'unchurched' and, more alliteratively, the 'none zone', acknowledging that 'more people here claim "none" when asked their religious affiliation than in any other region of the United States' (Killen and Silk 2004: 9). What distinguishes the religious landscape of the Northwest is not the lack of religion per se, 'so much as the social structural facts [of] religious heterogeneity and low-affiliation rates' (Shibley 2004: 142).

Scholars of religion in the Pacific Northwest describe the region in terms of 'plasticity' and 'fluidity', arguing that it exemplifies the anti-establishment religiosity of a spiritual marketplace of 'seekers'. In contrast to other regions of the United States, where one or another group of 'dwellers' dominate the religious scene, social-scientific data suggest that 'alternative spiritualities' are quite prevalent in the Northwest. The primacy of 'seeker' spiritualities—including movements as disparate as millennialist survivalism, new age metaphysicalism, and nature spirituality—readily serves as a marker of regional distinction. And although these forms of American religiosity can be found elsewhere, '[they] are expressed here in their purest form, thanks to the vast geographic and cultural space available to alternative religious (or quasi-religious) expression. Their high profile in regional culture is unmatched elsewhere in the United States' (Silk and Walsh 2008: 142).

The inclusion of nature spirituality in the admixture of Pacific Northwest religious exceptionalism is hardly peripheral. Many appraisals of the region, both popular and scholarly, take 'nature' to be the fundamental basis of religious life (though seldom defined in these literatures, 'nature' is clearly asserted as a broad repository of experiences and ideas about landscape, wilderness, biological fecundity, etc.). One of the most strikingly exceptionalist claims about why the Northwest is a 'none zone' is that the sheer grandeur and sublimity of the region's natural environment is an institution unto itself—one whose flourishing comes at the expense of traditional forms of religiosity. In their exploration of power of regionalism in contemporary American religious life, Silk and Walsh frame the relationship between religion and nature in the Pacific Northwest as a zero-sum exchange with a long history. They cite E.J. Klemme, a Progressive Era public educator in Washington State, who argued, 'the ascent of the Great Divide seemed too steep for church letters. The air of the Northwest seemed too rare for prayer. We have hurried forth to conquer the wilderness, but we have been conquered by it' (Silk and Walsh 2008: 135).

The precise mechanics through which institutional religion yields to nature often remains unstated. Pacific Northwest landscapes—old growth forests thick with brush, towering mountain ranges punctuated by active volcanoes, and vast inland plains with canyons and rivers—are commonly treated as sublime and wondrous natural features that dominate and overwhelm the human scale. The influence of nature on the Northwest's spiritual marketplace has been a flourishing trade in institutions emphasizing the experiential and ecstatic dimensions of religious life because, 'it takes a robust experience of the supernatural to hold its own against a backdrop of snow-capped mountains capable of eliciting

human devotion' (Killen and Silk 2004: 12). If nature in the Pacific Northwest is commonly taken as having something to do with the region's low levels of institutional religious affiliation, it also is seen to generate a certain sense of collective identity. Beyond its definitive role in the region's literary culture and thriving tourism-based economy, the environment is said to serve as a touchstone for what it means to be a Pacific Northwesterner. People in the region, 'think of themselves as nature lovers and stewards of the environment, people living close to nature, and this identity has spiritual meaning' (Silk and Walsh 2008: 158). In fact, several half-serious secession proposals have emerged from the Northwest's environmental communities, and bioregionalist sentiments are commonplace. At least since the 1970s, Northwesterners have lauded the region as 'an environmental pathfinder for the nation [that acts] as though the future can be shaped to avoid the failures of the national experience' (Bingham and Love 1979: xiv). In these sentiments is clearly visible a kind of environmental civil religion, a popular affection for nature that tinges public discourse with the language of nature spirituality.

The idea that the Pacific Northwest is more environmentally engaged than other regions of the country, coupled with its regionalist pride in its rugged landscapes, generates the kind of discourse we are calling 'Ecotopian exceptionalism'. Ecotopian exceptionalism posits civic environmentalism and nature spirituality as ideal characteristics for social and political cohesion in much the same sense as in Callenbach's utopian novel. Though such sentiments can easily be identified in both popular and scholarly discourses, it remains to be seen whether these features truly distinguish the Pacific Northwest from other regions of the United States. Because it gives voice to what the nation (or the region) desires for itself, exceptionalism is always predicated on a utopian yearning. In this paper we ask how social scientific scrutiny might yield a better understanding of the role exceptionalist discourse plays in the Pacific Northwest.

Is Ecotopia Indeed Exceptional?

Methodology

At one level, exceptionalism is an easy thesis to test via simple comparison of the putatively exceptional case against the background. This is indeed how we examined the Ecotopian claims summarized above. Yet complexities arise as soon as one posits this simple method: for instance, how different does this Ecotopia need to be to qualify as exceptional and in what ways: its genesis, its practices, its beliefs, its adherents' stories?

On one extreme, Ecotopia is *de facto* an exceptional case based on its abundance of Cascadian tropes; on the other, it is part of the same country as, say, Florida, with broadly shared language and—to at least some extent—cultural practice. In between these extremes, however, is a great deal of room, certainly enough to examine the claims that Ecotopia represents a distinct category of contemporary spirituality, worthy of emulation elsewhere.

In order to explore this possibility of exclusivity, we adopted a mixed, qualitative/quantitative methodology at two spatial scales: that of Ecotopian and other communities in Oregon, and of the Pacific Northwest in comparison to the rest of the United States. We chose a variety of communities to represent some degree of geographical representation (thus Portland, the most populous location in Oregon, included six) and also to indicate a variety of urban, suburban, and rural settings. Fourteen Oregon communities were selected overall, with roughly half of these representing intentional communities that prioritize ecological practice—arguably the most Ecotopian among fellow Ecotopians. For each of these communities, residents were invited to participate in focus group interviews involving roughly ten members per community, for a total of 140 participants.

Our two-hour videotaped interviews started with a brief discussion of participant impressions on utopia, dystopia, and Ecotopia, then focused in turn on the Pacific Northwest, the global situation, and the respondents' local community. The interview script and organization followed extensive pretesting in which we learned that engaging participants' reflexive accounts of utopia and dystopia from the beginning yielded more fruitful discussions than if we were less forthcoming as to our thematic interests. Interviews included both open-ended questions and a variety of tasks, such as asking respondents to rank a series of quotations in terms of which they found most meaningful or to have them watch and comment on a set of movie trailers depicting dystopian futures. At the conclusion of the interview, participants completed a brief survey including demographic and self-identification information.

The main portion of the survey consisted of six multi-item attitudinal scales we developed, including two existing three-item scales on immanent and transcendent sacredness of nature (derived from earlier empirical work—see Proctor and Berry 2005; Proctor 2008), two new scales on seeking and dwelling, and two new scales on utopia (specifically, virtues evident in *Ecotopia*) and dystopia. Based on the claims of exceptionalism summarized above, we expected that residents of intentional versus other Oregon communities, and residents of the Pacific Northwest versus other Americans, would ascribe greater immanent sacredness to nature,

be more associated with seeking than dwelling, and also be more strongly associated with utopian (and possibly dystopian) attitudes.

As preliminary material for seeking and dwelling scales, we relied on earlier work including C. Daniel Batson's Quest scale (Batson 1976) and Vicky Genia's revised Spiritual Experience Index (Genia 1997), utilizing insights from Wuthnow and others in designing relevant statements. For the utopia scale, we devised statements representing the primary virtues of Ecotopia expressed in Callenbach's novel. There was no precedent available for the dystopia scale, so we constructed candidate statements based on a survey of ecological discourse and dystopian literature. Each of the four new scales initially consisted of eight candidate statements, assembled randomly into an online pilot survey for which we solicited responses via a variety of email lists. After cleaning the data of redundancies and incomplete responses ($n = 240$), we compared the results of stepwise elimination based on Cronbach's alpha and factor analysis to select five statements per scale. The resultant scales consisted of an unweighted average of component statements, which were randomized for the final survey and enumerated via five-point Likert responses representing extent of respondent agreement or disagreement.

Digital video from all interviews was entered into HyperResearch, a qualitative analysis application, for both text coding and annotation of other significant interview elements. Each significant utterance was coded for a variety of qualities, such as theme, spatial scale, inferred temporal trend, and source of authority. Code frequencies were standardized for each group interview by code type, and then compared with results from other community interviews. Survey responses were entered into SPSS for statistical analysis.

Following completion of our community interviews, we administered the survey online to a U.S. audience in order to compare responses of Pacific Northwest residents (defined here as residing in northern California, Oregon, and Washington) with those from other regions. We advertised via a number of websites (e.g., beliefnet.com), promising respondents comparisons of their performance on our six scales upon completion of the survey, which we were able to provide via custom programming we did of our online survey instrument. The resultant sample of 654 respondents (including only U.S. adults) was self-selected and thus non-representative, but demographic data we obtained suggest how they compare to the U.S. population as a whole. In general, they were less ethnically diverse, more female, more highly educated, and slightly older, though of similar income distribution to the American population. National survey data were entered into SPSS for statistical analysis.

Qualitative Results

Qualitative analysis of our focus group interviews appears to confirm the presence of an exceptionalist discourse in the Pacific Northwest. If exceptionalism posits a link between distinctive places or landscapes and the moral character of their inhabitants, interviewees frequently advanced exceptionalist claims about the region. When prompted to talk about the Northwest's 'utopian qualities' and about what differentiates the region from other parts of the United States, respondents cited nature-based themes with near universality. Participants also identified a range of social phenomena purportedly characteristic of the Pacific Northwest (e.g., a thriving progressive movement, high levels of environmental activism, a relaxed social atmosphere, a strong arts scene, etc.). Respondents frequently expressed these two observations in conjunction with one another, suggesting that the positive and distinctive aspects of Pacific Northwest landscapes and subcultures are associated. The ideas that animate the strain of Ecotopian exceptionalism that we identified, however, suggest a more complex locus for regional identity than some unchurched populace of outdoor enthusiasts.

Questions about the Northwest's utopian qualities and distinctive features elicited a number of common nature-themed responses. Virtually every focus group cited the region's climate and landscape as ideal types. The weather was variously described as 'mild', conducive to agriculture, and generative of lush forests. The landscapes of the Pacific Northwest—hardly reducible to one type—were praised as diverse, wild, publicly owned, and easily accessible. Respondents from several communities noted that the variety of ecosystems in the Northwest was a kind of natural and economic good. Celebrations of the Northwest's diverse ecosystems highlighted the region's superiority to ecologically monolithic areas like the Great Plains States. In particular, the proximity of diverse ecosystems to the Pacific Ocean was said to be significant because 'edges are the most productive [kinds of places]'. Perhaps because the focus groups were framed in utopian (and dystopian) terms, this kind of ecological discourse did not value nature for merely aesthetic reasons; rather, interview participants appear to associate the well-being of Northwestern ecosystems with human flourishing. In keeping with Callenbach's vision, at least one respondent favored the Northwest over other parts of the United States because 'even the cities [there] are pretty green'. Claims like the suggestion that the Northwest is among the 'best situated places to deal with the fallout from climate change' evidence a belief, widely shared among study participants, that the Pacific Northwest's landscapes insulate it from troubles other regions regularly experience (e.g., cataclysmic climatic events, resource depletion,

etc.). The predominate view among our interviewees, then, was that as an assemblage of ecosystems the Pacific Northwest is well suited as a habitat for human beings. Nature in their view is more than wild: it is beneficent.

If the exceptionalist tendencies of Pacific Northwest regionalism connected to the natural environment confirm our expectations, content analysis of our interviews suggests that the religious referents of these discussions do not conform neatly to the descriptions of religious life in the Northwest outlined above. Our interview coding sought to identify comments about either (explicitly) religious or (implicitly) spiritual themes. Low levels of institutional religiosity were readily confirmed: only one interviewee directly referenced institutional religion. Given the low rates of conventional religious belonging in the Northwest, this is unsurprising. However, the rarity of direct references to non-traditional forms of religion (i.e., spirituality) is intriguing. Save for the handful of references to 'faeries', our interview data are largely absent explicit treatments of the kinds of personal and public phenomena typically classified as spiritual (e.g., holistic medicine, ritual eclecticism, practices geared towards personal transformation, etc.). Rather than these easily recognizable forms of spirituality, what appear much more often in focus group discussions are references to 'consciousness' and 'awareness'. Individuals from many of the groups we interviewed—including both intentional communities and others—invoked these spiritually imbued concepts, suggesting an alternative notion about what makes the Northwest spiritually distinctive.

A number of contemporary sociologists of religion have tended to approach spirituality with particular attention to the importance placed on 'practice' and 'experience' (e.g., Roof 1998; Pargament 1999). Conceptualizing spirituality (at least in part) as a repudiation of institutional modes of religion, scholarship in this area mirrors the efforts of religious studies to shift focus from beliefs to practices (Hall 1997). While this perspective yields important insights about the changing religious landscape of the modern world, it also risks overlooking the ways in which spirituality might be structured around ideas, rather than techniques. Our interview data demonstrate a remarkable cohesion around a particular spiritual idea that, according to respondents, differentiates the Northwest from other parts of the nation. This idea is, in essence, that people are 'spiritually asleep' and need to 'awaken'. Though there are certainly differences among our respondents as to what constitutes 'awakeness', the idea, frequently expressed in terms of 'consciousness' is associated with progressive politics, abiding connections to place, nature appreciation, and social tolerance. Using a relatively consistent

vocabulary, interviewees praised the Northwest as having 'lots of conscious people', 'an abundance of consciousness', 'more people are awake from the mainstream', 'a movement of people connected to the land', 'critical mass of socially and environmentally conscious people', 'a consciousness in this area—a kind of utopian thinking', and 'a large percentage of progressive and environmentally aware people'. There can be little doubt about the exceptionalist cadence of such claims. It should be noted that although references to 'consciousness' and 'awareness' were elements of our focus group interviews at both intentional and non-intentional communities, these ideas were decidedly more prevalent at our intentional community research sites.

Interviewees were also willing to speculate about the sources of and social ramifications of such consciousness. A prevailing view was that this consciousness or awareness arises from the surrounding natural landscape. Respondents asserted that 'people here [in the Pacific Northwest] are more attuned to nature because they get out in it more'; that 'geographic beauty provides people with something special, appreciation of nature requires human understanding and awareness'; and, more opaquely, that 'wildness feeds our spirit'. Perhaps the most direct explanation as to why the nature in the Pacific Northwest elicits 'awareness' is that, according to another interviewee, the 'energetic qualities of the land are better here'. Ruminations like these about precisely why Northwesterners are more 'aware' are, however, perhaps less telling than discussions about how 'awareness' shapes the region's social life. The 'consciousness' of the Pacific Northwest means, most simply, that 'sustainability and spirituality are not on the fringe'. The cultural centrality of 'spirituality and sustainability' undergirds a regionalist identity of the Pacific Northwest as 'good for social experimentation' and as an important source of 'new mentalities'. To say that the Northwest is culturally progressive, environmentally aware, and spiritually conscious is to embrace the Ecotopian thesis. Focus group participants elaborated a vision akin to Callenbach's in their celebration of the Northwest's 'progressive thinking and activism', its 'abundance of creativity', its 'open-mindedness' and 'tolerance for alternative lifestyles', and generally 'laid-back approach to life'.

What does the preponderance of these themes in an often-implicit conversation about spirituality tell us about the religious character of the Pacific Northwest? Based on our data, Pacific Northwesterners seem to identify themselves as an elect group of environmentally aware people, an interesting finding for three reasons. First, throughout the responses cited above is woven the assertion of a decidedly exceptionalist position: in general, residents of the Pacific Northwest are participants in a

forward-thinking social movement that has achieved some important measure of consciousness or awareness—a normative claim that (perhaps loosely) structures group identity around the purported possession of a unique moral compass. Second, these data suggest that countercultural ideas are carried in a kind of religious current; that is, expressions of discontent with mainstream society convey a sense of election among a group of ‘more aware’ persons. This finding contributes to a longstanding scholarly attention to the engagement of spirituality and counterculturalism (see Bloch 1998; Stone 1978). Third, the language used to voice the spiritual dimension of Ecotopian exceptionalism complexifies—or at least attempts to elide—the distinction between seeking and dwelling. The association of spiritual awareness with a particular place and a particular social collective seems more closely in line with Wuthnow’s insistence that ‘a spirituality of dwelling emphasizes *habitation*’ than it does with his assertion that ‘a spirituality of seeking emphasizes *negotiation*’ (1998: 3-4, *emphases original*). Although spiritualities of dwelling are typically associated with traditional religiosity, the language animating Ecotopian exceptionalism appears to marry a seeker’s spiritual experimentalism with a dweller’s love of communally shared values. And thus the rhetoric of utopia, of the seeker’s idea of dwelling, suffuses Ecotopian discourse almost to the point of convincing the observer that Ecotopia is indeed all about dwelling, in an exceptional manner.²

Quantitative Results

If qualitative analysis of group interviews suggests an exceptionalist mode of self-identification among residents of Oregon communities, one premised on a Northwestern attunement to the ‘sacrality’ of nature, to what extent is exceptionalism empirically validated among those for whom it is most commonly attributed? For the purpose of this study, we will focus primarily on quantitative results that compare our six multi-item attitudinal scales between (a) residents of intentional versus other communities in Oregon, and (b) residents of the Pacific Northwest versus other regions in the United States. We will also examine correlations among these six scales via our national sample.³

2. The spatial notion of utopia employed here underscores the power of a geographic approach to the study of religion. Where ecotopian discourse animates collective environmental and spiritual yearnings, it serves as what Thomas Tweed calls a ‘cartography of desire’, cf. Tweed 2006.

3. It is worth noting that demographic correlates with all scales were weak ($r < 0.2$) for age, education, and income. While sex correlated slightly with immanent sacredness ($r = 0.28$, $p < .01$), suggesting that women tended to ascribe immanent

Figure 1 summarizes mean scores, obtained via our post-interview surveys, on our six scales by residents of intentional and other communities we studied, adjusted so that 0 represents the Likert scale midpoint between agreement and disagreement to the statements that constituted each scale. Mean scores above 0, then, suggest general identification with the attitudes represented on a given scale. As indicated in Figure 1, residents of all communities we studied tend to identify with immanent sacredness (as well as transcendent sacredness to some extent), hold strong utopian and dystopian sentiments, and are spiritual seekers versus dwellers. Residents of intentional communities scored, on average, slightly higher on the immanent and transcendent sacredness and seeker scales, but in general the differences between residents of intentional and other communities were negligible. Our most surprising result from these data, in fact, was the close level of agreement on all six scales between residents of intentional and other communities.

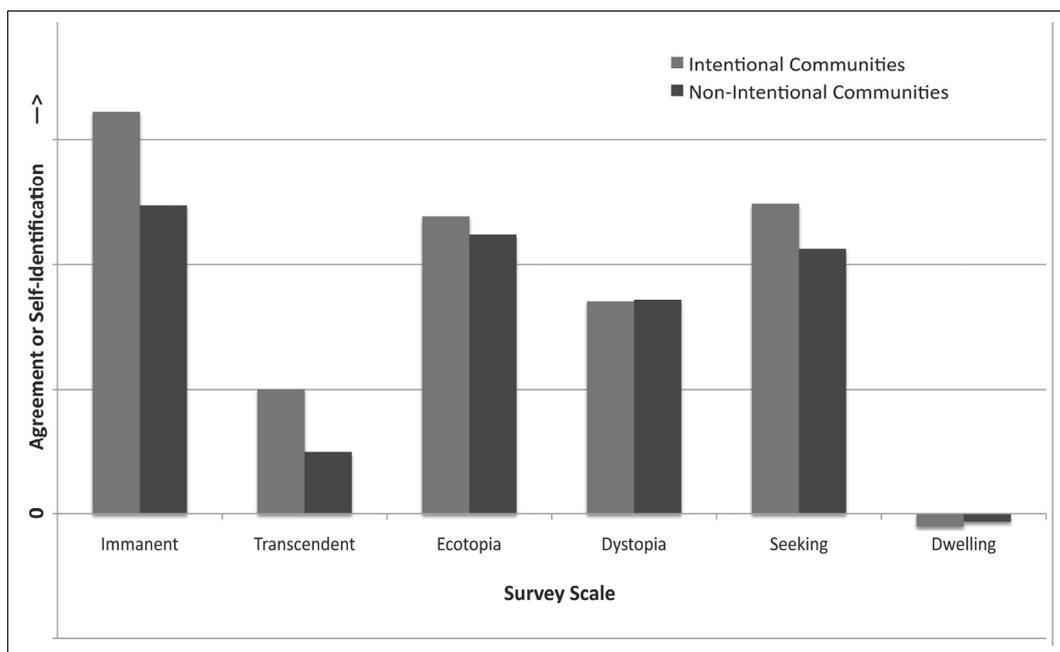


Figure 1. *Scale Deviations by Oregon Community*

A somewhat similar pattern emerges when comparing the online national survey results between residents of the Pacific Northwest and other regions. Figure 2 presents mean scale scores in like manner as Figure 1 above: here too, results were largely comparable, the largest exception being somewhat different scores on transcendent sacredness

sacredness to nature more than men, sex had no other correlations above 0.2. In short, attitudinal tendencies summarized in these scales were exhibited by a diverse range of Americans, not readily identifiable via common demographics.

(and to a lesser degree spiritual dwelling). These differences are related to differences (not depicted in Figure 2) in self-identification as 'religious' and 'spiritual', with Pacific Northwest residents scoring significantly lower than residents of other parts of the United States. What pattern can be made of these four differences? The answer could well be the Pacific Northwest's reputation noted above as the 'none zone', a region of relatively low religious participation: indeed, scale items related to transcendent sacredness and spiritual dwelling included a good deal of traditional religious language, and the strong correlation ($r = 0.41$, $p < .01$) between respondents' self-identification as religious and spiritual suggests these items were not as independent as some believe (Zinnbauer et al. 1997; Marler and Hadaway 2002).

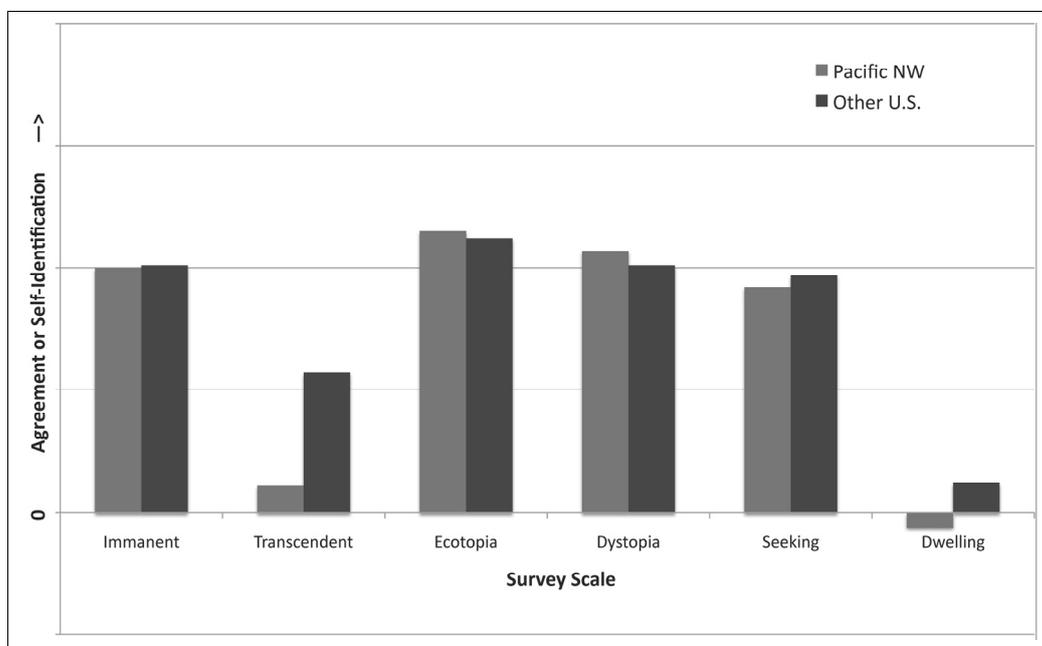


Figure 2. *Scale Deviations by U.S. Region*

In brief, the only claim to exceptionalism that was vindicated by our survey results was one that has been well corroborated by other sources: the Pacific Northwest is a unique region in terms of religious participation. But, in spite of their utopian language and ecological practices, residents of the intentional communities we studied were more like than unlike their fellow Oregonians, and in a larger sense, Ecotopia (i.e., the Pacific Northwest) is more like than unlike the rest of the United States. Ecotopian dreams and dystopian dread, a greater emphasis on spiritual seeking than dwelling, and a greater resonance with immanent than transcendent sacredness in nature are cultural features of all who participated in our study.

Simple zero-order correlations between the six scales for our national survey ($n = 654$) offer glimpses into a larger picture on these cultural trends (see Table 1; $p < .01$ for all shown). The magnitude of these correlations alone was in many cases surprisingly large: though a large correlation was expected between transcendent sacredness and dwelling given the similar religious language used in statements for both scales, the other strong correlations were unexpected. In particular, the utopian/Ecotopian scale correlated highly with immanent sacredness ($r = 0.53$), seeking spirituality ($r = 0.38$), and, surprisingly, dystopia ($r = 0.53$). The picture that emerges is one of a strong Ecotopian impulse founded in part on immanent sacredness in nature and manifesting itself in a seeking spirituality, but strongly coupled with a heightened sense of dystopian dread. Indeed, further analysis of our national-scale survey data suggests that the strongest scale correlate with self-identification as environmentalist is not immanent sacredness ($r = 0.37$), as our previous publications have found, but a strong Ecotopian impulse ($r = 0.48$) and a slightly stronger sense of dystopian dread ($r = 0.50$)! If the green movement is becoming mainstream in the United States, these then are some of its strongest spiritual tendencies. These data suggest that religiosity of American environmentalism is not reducible to a reverence for the sacredness of nature, rather, it is also characterized by a deep affinity with dystopian anxiety.

Table 1. *Zero-Order Correlations between Attitudinal Scale Items (U.S. Survey)*

Immanent	Transcendent	Ecotopia	Dystopia	Seeking	Dwelling	
1	0.25	0.53	0.37	0.45	0.15	Immanent
	1	---	---	---	0.64	Transcendent
		1	0.53	0.38	---	Ecotopia
			1	0.24	---	Dystopia
				1	-0.17	Seeking
					1	Dwelling

Zero-order Pearson correlations; $p < .01$ for all shown

The strength of these correlation values, not commonly found in social surveys, may arise in part from a self-selected and thus possibly more opinionated sample, but results this striking are worthy of corroboration in further, representative-sample survey research. Indeed, the characteristics of our national sample relative to the American population (less ethnically diverse, more female, more highly educated, slightly older, similar income distribution) may suggest a particular demographic niche of contemporary American environmentalism in which utopian dreams

and dystopian dread are among its defining ideological elements. Perhaps imagined landscapes, whether utopian or dystopian, are at the heart of this seeking-spirituality sort of environmentalism.

A final empirical finding from this study sheds light on the relationship between seeking and dwelling. Suggestions in the literature that seeking and dwelling are opposing modalities of modern spiritual life would lead us to expect a strong negative correlation between the two; but in fact the national survey correlation among respondents between spiritual seeking and dwelling scales was relatively weak ($r = -0.17$), and the Oregon communities survey correlation was even slightly positive ($r = 0.10$). Presumably, spiritual seeking and dwelling relate in all sorts of ways, not simply in contradistinction.

Conclusion

In framing the contemporary American search for place and the quest for natural lifestyles in utopian and dystopian terms, this study has identified a particular strain of exceptionalist discourse about the Pacific Northwest. Our interview data confirm that exceptionalism in the Pacific Northwest praises the region's natural beauty, climate, and ecological habitability. The perspectives of many Oregonians also corroborate the claims of popular authors who, like Callenbach, celebrate the Northwest as a distinctive natural landscape whose inhabitants are more environmentally attuned than other Americans. A finding of our study—of particular interest to scholars interested in the intersection of religion and nature—is that this vein of exceptionalist discourse involves a joint spiritual-geographical premise. As an expression of social and landscape identity, our respondents' exceptionalist claims positioned them among an elect group possessive of a special kind of ecological 'awareness'. A potential question for further research concerns the sources and origins of such exceptionalist rhetoric, particularly its expression in terms of 'consciousness'. Do Pacific Northwesterners draw on exceptionalist language because of perceived differences in landscape, or perhaps because of received histories of the Northwest as 'the last frontier', an appropriate home for spiritually rugged individualists?

To return to the basic question posed above: to what degree is the spirituality espoused by Ecotopian exceptionalism actually exceptional? The claims of Ecotopian exceptionalism are intelligible insofar as they structure the way Pacific Northwesterners think about what it means to be an inhabitant of the region. These claims are less intelligible, however, when subjected to empirical scrutiny. Quantitative analysis of our survey data indicates that with respect to the main factors we interrogated

(dwelling, seeking, nature as immanently sacred, nature as transcendently sacred, ecotopian optimism, and dystopian pessimism) there are few measurable differences between Pacific Northwesterners and those living in other regions of the United States—indeed, even among ordinary and extraordinary Ecotopias in Oregon, as our comparative study of intentional and other communities revealed. As would be anticipated by the low rates of institutional religious affiliation in the Northwest, survey respondents from the region demonstrated somewhat less enthusiasm for the transcendent sacredness of nature than did the broader pool of U.S. respondents. This small difference, however, does not contravene the underlying pattern suggested by our quantitative data: immanent sacredness of nature is more common than transcendent sacredness. Across all other scales we employed, Ecotopians differ little from each other, whether hearkening from intentional or regular communities, and from their counterparts in other regions of the country. While perhaps the Pacific Northwest is something of an exception to the broader American trends of institutional religiosity (here reflected in our measures of transcendent sacredness of nature and dwelling), it closely aligns with the national averages of spirituality analyzed in our research (viz. seeking and immanent sacredness of nature). This suggests another intriguing question: insofar as seeking and dwelling do not seem to reflect opposing modes of religiosity, do they still afford an accurate map of the contemporary religious landscape? The notion that utopia might be understood as the seeker's idea of dwelling suggests that research structured around 'spiritual utopianism' might be an appropriate way to chart a more nuanced topography of contemporary religious life. Given the salience of dystopian sentiments in our quantitative research, analyses of 'spiritual dystopianism' might also prove a useful means of mapping the religious dimensions of modern environmentalism.

In contradistinction to its treatment in popular literature and in the discourse of Northwesterners themselves, Ecotopia is less exceptional than *imagined*. These Ecotopian invocations of nature spirituality may be more closely tied to self-representation than to verifiable socio-cultural attitudes and practices—even in the case of the most utopian of Ecotopian communities. The claims made under the rubric of Ecotopian exceptionalism ought not be taken as self-validating truth claims; rather, scholars of religion and nature should engage such discourse like any other religious claim. The image of a community of ecologically enlightened citizens animates Northwesterners' self-identity more than it characterizes tangible differences among them, or between the Pacific Northwest and other regions of the United States. Because it is more closely wedded to the ideal than to the actual, Ecotopian exceptionalism

is utopian in Wilde's sense of the term: it charts a course towards Ecotopia more than it describes the place. From this perspective, the spiritual thrust of Ecotopian exceptionalism is closer to seeking than to dwelling. Although it enumerates a place-based spirituality that looks, at first glance, like an ecospiritual form of dwelling, Ecotopian exceptionalism remains pursuant of such elusive spiritual habitation.

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