

Religion Today
June 20-26, 2004

Religious Character is Shaped by Economic Factors in the Rockies

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The Rocky Mountain West has long been ignored by scholars of American religion. While every year new books are published about the Pilgrims and the religious formation of the earliest colonies (in what is now New England) and the Protestant Evangelical character of the American Southeast and the Catholic character of the American Southwest are the current hot topics, the Mountain West seems to rate only an occasional article.

In this context, the appearance of a new book surveying the public character of the religious life of the Rockies, "Religion and Public Life in the Mountain West," should be celebrated. Jan Shipps, the grand dame of Mormon studies, and Mark Silk, a leading analyst of American public religion, have edited a collection of articles giving a broad picture of the seven Rocky Mountain states. They provide an initial assessment of each state's current religious make-up.

Philip Deloria contributes an insightful essay comparing Boulder and Colorado Springs. It shows that each city's present religious character stems from economic activities.

Colorado Springs provides the clearest case. When the mines were depleted in the late 19th century, the city courted tourism and then later government funding. By the late 20th century, the Springs became a large center of military development, with five major military facilities surrounding it.

Then when Congress began cutting bases in the 1980s, the city council decided to entice evangelical Christian organizations and companies to relocate there. At one point, they even obtained a \$4 million grant to assist their recruitment efforts. And these efforts paid off. Today, 100 religious organizations call Colorado Springs home, including Focus on the Family and the International Bible Society. Colorado Springs has now become a national center of evangelical Christian outreach and political activity.

Boulder took a different path. When faced with the loss of its mining, Boulder's leaders decided to emphasize its natural beauty, especially the rock formations known as the Flatirons. Boulder's surroundings developed a reputation as a place where

one could encounter nature as a spiritual experience. In the 1970s, this reputation grew when it became a center for Buddhist study. It began to attract not only a large Buddhist population, but also people active in a variety of "New Age" religions who saw Boulder as a place where they could undertake their spiritual journeys and meet others who were having similar spiritual experiences.

Boulder's economic decisions thus led to an open, even free-wheeling, religious culture, where people of different religions and spiritual beliefs interact with each other.

For both cities, economic circumstances led to the development of their religious character. The difference in their economic situations led to the differences in their characters. More significantly, in both cases, the economic situation brought many people into the city, and it was the newcomers who gave the city its religious definition.

Wyoming exhibits the opposite phenomenon. It has maintained an almost steady population for the past several decades through the continuing loss of its young people to jobs out of state. Rather than having many people coming in, it has lots of people going out--mostly people in their early 20s.

What impact does this have on Wyoming's religious character? Perhaps people from similar religious backgrounds are leaving, which would mean that there would be a percentage increase in different religions or denominations among those left behind. Or perhaps people of all religions are leaving, which would suggest that there would be no change. This new book on the religions of the Mountain West inspires many such questions, even though it has the space to answer only a few. Hopefully, this will lead to more studies in the future.