Over the past two centuries, Wyoming has undergone an enormous amount of religious change. From the religions of the many Native American tribes who lived in this land to Protestant and Catholic missionaries and settlers, to Mormons and to Chinese Buddhists and Daoists, the people living in Wyoming have adhered to and been influenced by many different religious views and practices.

A new book by long-time Wyoming resident and pastor Warren Murphy brings together into one narrative the stories of religious activity in Wyoming with the state's history for the first time. This work, "On Sacred Ground: A Religious and Spiritual History of Wyoming," is written for a popular audience and begins with the first endeavors of Christian missionaries and continues to current religious developments.

There are many stories here about many religions, religious organizations and their representatives, too many even to mention here. But I want to focus a single feature to which Murphy frequently returns, namely, the alternating fortunes of Protestantism and Catholicism in Wyoming.

Today, even the most casual tourist to Wyoming knows that Father Pierre Jean De Smet conducted the first Catholic Mass in 1840; it is carefully labeled on the state's official road map near Pinedale. It is less well-known that the first Protestant service took place nearby five years earlier in 1835. The Congregationalist minister Samuel Parker, along with his Presbyterian associate Dr. Marcus Whitman, preached to both the mountain men and the Indians gathered there at a rendezvous.

Why is De Smet's mass so well remembered and Parker's services not? Perhaps because Parker did not stay in Wyoming; at the end of that summer he continued on to present-day Washington state. Even though Whitman went back east to find more missionaries for the western frontier, when he returned with them in 1836, they too journeyed on to the Northwest. Other Protestant missionaries did the same in 1837 and 1838.

So when De Smet arrived in 1840, there were no Christian missionaries in Wyoming. De Smet by contrast remained in the area for more than a decade and led Catholics missions among the Indians. In fact, when the U.S. government called the tribes together for the Treaty of 1851, they requested De Smet's presence to help with the negotiations.

The years 1867-1869 caused a major change in Wyoming's character. The railroad was built across the southern part of the territory, the federal government officially designated Wyoming as a territory, and the reservation system was established for the Native Americans.

Now the tables shifted. In 1871, the Board of Indian Commissioners met to assign different denominations to supervise the reservations. Even though De Smet was assigned to the commission, the Catholic Church received responsibility for only four reservations while the Protestants acquired the other 38. The Episcopal Church alone received seven, including the Wind River Indian Reservation in Wyoming.

The railroad brought many new settlers of European descent to Wyoming and the white population increased significantly. The missionary boards shifted their emphasis to this growing immigrant populace. Presbyterian minister Sheldon Jackson founded new churches in Cheyenne, Laramie and Rawlins in 1869. The Methodists, Baptists, Episcopalians and Congregationalists were also active. Cheyenne's St Mark's Episcopal Church, begun in 1869, became the first church building erected in Wyoming.

By 1890, 43 church buildings had been erected in Wyoming, most along the train line paralleling the state's southern border, but several were built in the state's northern areas. Even though most of these churches were Protestant, a census taken at the time indicates that the vast majority of declared church members identified themselves as Catholics, some 8,453 people, while second place went to the Methodists with just 1,322. The Episcopalians were third with a mere 467.

Despite this, the 13,000 church members made up only a fifth of Wyoming's population. Nearly 80 percent of Wyoming's citizens were unchurched.

By the 21st century, these figures have shifted somewhat. The recent American Religious Landscape survey indicates about 50 percent of Wyoming citizens follow Protestant beliefs, about 25 percent adhere to Catholic beliefs, and 5 percent to Mormon beliefs. But 20 percent of the state's citizens still indicate "none of the above" when asked about their religious orientation.

So the 20th century brought about a significant increase in Christian beliefs, both in real numbers and in percentage terms, a development described in Murphy's book. But Wyomingites still reveal a high percentage of people unassociated with formal religion.

Note: This column is indebted to Warren Murphy's book, "On Sacred Ground: A Religious and Spiritual History of Wyoming," 2011; available through Amazon.com and BN.com.

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