

Think Locally, Act Globally

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The first day I went to work in Atlanta, my wife went out to the mailbox where she was quickly approached by a neighbor from across the street, who, after introducing herself, immediately asked, “What church do y’all belong to?” With, I’m afraid, a little trepidation, my wife allowed as how we were Jewish, and so wouldn’t be needing a church. A half hour later our neighbor was at the back door with a piece of paper, on which were written a list of local synagogues. This was not how new neighbors did things in the privatized religious world of New England. To paraphrase the call letters of Atlanta’s famous radio station WSB: Welcome South, Sister.

I tell this story because what I learned as a Yankee working as a daily journalist in the South is that, in the words of the *Music Man*, you’ve got to know the territory—especially if you’re interested in bringing about social change. You’ve got to, in other words, think locally. By that I do not mean parochially. But if you don’t know the values, the habits, the points of view that prevail in a specific culture, your ability to effect change is going to be limited, perhaps severely. That is not to say that we should be unmindful of the larger issues, the more-than-local concerns. But the danger of exclusively global thinking is that it can lead to the totalitarian conviction that there’s only one path, only one way forward, only one true solution. A critical example of such exclusive, one-size-fits-all thinking afflicted the very environmentalist movement out of which the aphorism “Act Locally, Think Globally” emerged some 40 years ago. As Carl Pope, the executive director of the Sierra Club, put it in an interview with the *Christian Science Monitor* last September, “I was part of the generation that made the choice—the horrendous strategic blunder—of situating ourselves outside the institutions of faith. Now we have a chance to repent for and reform from that error.”

It is now a commonplace—and particularly in these parts—that environmentalism is intimately connected with institutions of faith, with spirituality. Of course, spiritual ideologies can be as totalitarian as secular ones—the downside of Global Oneness, as it were. Knowing the territory means having to reckon with worldviews that may be resistant to one’s own. To act globally, it’s necessary, in short, to think locally. And the challenge of thinking oneself into a new locale in order to act globally can be as close as a few miles down the road. It need not involve looking beyond the borders of one’s own country or even one’s own state.

I began working as a daily journalist two decades ago, at a time when the news media were at the center of the culture wars. Journalists were the secularists—the enemies of faith, or so the charge went. That was maybe true at some places, but it certainly wasn’t true at the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. I remember being struck with how many of my colleagues were churchgoers, and made no secret of it. They even introduced people to

you as “a member of my church.” Shocking. So even though “real” Southerners regard Atlanta as a hopelessly Yankee town, to me, coming from a real Yankee place, it seemed like a different civilization. No, it *was* a different civilization.

While I was in Atlanta, I began to work, as a kind of participant observer, on a book about news coverage of religion in America. And so I became aware of a view that had taken hold in the newspaper industry (absorbed, to be sure, from certain sociologists) that religion in America was become de-institutionalized. That Americans were typically spiritual seekers, not members of organized religion. And therefore, that reporters on the religion beat ought not to spend their time covering “institutions”—especially, God forbid, denominational meetings—but instead should explore the spiritual lives and practices of actual people. That might all be well and good in, say, Santa Barbara or Seattle, but it seemed a highly problematic approach for a journalist to take Boston or, well, Atlanta, where religious institutions seemed to be doing just fine, thank you. It dawned on me that in order to cover religion properly, you had to recognize that religion is not the same thing everywhere in America. Thus did I begin to believe in a gospel of American regionalism.

Now, as it happened, the first thing I did when I got a job starting a center for the study of religion in public life was to institute a program designed to educate journalists (editors especially, since from the reporter’s perspective, it’s always the editors who most need educating) about how religion might best be covered *in their region*. And rather than decide what I thought they should know, I scared up groups of local experts—professors—in every region I could. Some things all groups agreed on: Journalists needed to know more about Islam. But the variations from place to place were striking. And they led us to follow up the project with a far more substantial one to look closely at religion by region in America. The result was a series of nine books, one on each of eight regions of the country and a final summary volume, which is shortly to come off the press.

Let me take a moment to indicate just how different America’s regions are, from the standpoint of their religious demography. I’ll stress major distinguishing marks, some of which you may have a sense of, but the numbers are dramatic. I should first say that the eight regions into which we divided the country will likely all be familiar to you except the one we called the Southern Crossroads—essentially what historians know as the Old Southwest: Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Missouri. I should add that we included Nevada in the Pacific region with California and Hawaii, because 90 percent of Nevadans live within 10 miles of California, and operate culturally within its religious zone more than they do in the Mountain West. Anyway, here they are.

I. Middle Atlantic. Two-thirds of the population is affiliated with a religious body, giving it the second-highest affiliation rate in the country. Of the remainder, over half are Catholic. Mainline Protestants are pretty plentiful, evangelicals no so much. And Jews, weighing it at 5.7 percent, are three times thicker on the ground than in the nation as a whole.

II. New England. Over two-thirds of religious adherents are Catholic, making it by far the most Catholic region in the country. White evangelicals are only three percent of the population, about a quarter the size of the mainline Protestant population.

III. The South. It will come as no surprise to you to learn that this is the country's evangelical heartland. Over 40 percent of the Southern population consists of white evangelicals, to which should be added many members of white mainline Protestant denominations (notably Methodists and Presbyterians but also Episcopalians), who identify themselves as "born again or evangelical Christians." Plus over 20 percent of the population are African Americans, and in terms of religious style they certainly should be included in the evangelical family. Altogether, the South is as evangelical as Utah is Mormon. Catholics, by contrast, constitute only eight percent of the Southern population, and over 40 percent of them live in Florida.

IV. The Southern Crossroads. This is the South plus Catholics; there are proportionately more than twice as many Catholics in the Crossroads as in the South, these notably consisting of Cajuns in Louisiana and Hispanics in Texas, plus Germans in St. Louis. The Crossroads is also the heartland of Pentecostalism: Pentecostal and Holiness folk are as plentiful here as Mainline Protestants are. It is the least religiously diverse region in the country, and the region where the rate of religious affiliation is the highest.

V. The Midwest. This is the most balanced of the regions, its religious demography most closely approximating national figures. Mainline Protestants come in stronger than in the nation as a whole, outweighing white evangelicals by a modest amount. Catholics weigh in at 23 percent, slightly higher than the national norm.

We come now to the West proper, which relative to the rest of the country is a kind of super region most distinguished by its low levels of religious affiliation.

VI. The Pacific. This region has the third lowest affiliation rate in the West at 47 percent. Catholics are the numerous religious group, constituting 28 percent of the population. Mainline Protestants have been in rapid decline over the past half century: the Pacific is the only region in the country where not a single mainline Protestant denomination—not Methodists or Presbyterians or Episcopalians—outnumbers adherents of Eastern religions. That may not sound like a big deal to you here in Boulder, but it would be, by the standards of, say, Indianapolis, astonishing. In the Protestant world, Pacific evangelicals outnumber mainliners nearly three to one.

VII. Pacific Northwest. At 63 percent of the population, this is the least affiliated region of the country by far. We call it "The None Zone"—the place where, when you ask people what is your religion if any, 30 percent of the people say "none." That is, they are not merely unaffiliated, they have no religion—at twice the rate of the rest of the country. Catholics, the most numerous religious tradition in the region, constitute only 11 percent of the population, almost equaled by evangelicals, who may soon surpass them.

VIII. The Mountain West. Your region beats out the Pacific among the unaffiliated by a point, at 48 percent, but falls well behind the Pacific Northwest. As in the rest of the West, Catholics are the most numerous among adherents, her constituting 17 percent of the population. What's different about the Mountain West is that the Catholics are followed by the Mormons, at 14 percent. It's important to recognize, however, that these aggregate numbers disguise the fact that this region is really three sub-regions: an historically Catholic southern tier, an historically unaffiliated northeast territory, and a Mormon Corridor.

Now this regional religious demography is suggestive but only that. What's really important are the cultural patterns that the demography relates to. To offer you some idea of these patterns, I'll give you some brief general characterizations but mostly what I want to do is tell some stories. Journalists and historians find the most meaning in stories, so I will apologize in advance for this to the social scientists in the room.

As far as the Middle Atlantic goes, I want to begin by highlighting the tradition of religious social reform known as the Social Gospel, which is strong throughout the region but especially in New York City, where it was spearheaded by Mainline Protestantism early in the 20th century. The retreat of Mainline Protestantism in the century's waning years left it to other clergy to lead the charge for moral reform and resist various forms of evil in the city. In 1999, it was the Rev. Al Sharpton who took charge of organizing a rolling series of demonstrations to protest the killing by police of Amadou Diallo, an African Muslim. In due course, the protesters involved rabbis, imams, black Protestant pastors, and Catholic priests, and led to dramatic encounters between the prominent Harlem pastor Calvin Butts and Mayor Rudolf Giuliani, and between Cardinal John O'Connor and the city cops. Significantly, the protests also enlisted members of a host of city tribes defined in other than religious terms: labor unions, gays and lesbians, academicians, anti-war activists. As the *Village Voice's* Peter Noel described a March 26 demonstration in front of police headquarters, "It has been six hours since the Reverend Al Sharpton orchestrated the largest multi-ethnic sit-in of his 15-day campaign of civil disobedience." Altogether, the Diallo affair resulted in Muslims achieving new status as one of the "ethnic" communities to be reckoned with in New York City politics. The gangs of New York, as it were. As Noel's description indicates, the protests were conceived "ethnically" not religiously. In fact, they didn't represent a "religion story" to New York newspapers, not one of which assigned a religion reporter to cover them. In a subsequent conversation, Gustav Niebuhr, then a religion reporter for the *New York Times*, said it had never occurred to him to write about the Diallo affair.

This will give you a sense of the tribal character of religion in the Middle Atlantic, the sense that your religious identity is part of a larger ascribed ethno-religious identity. You can hear it in this lyric from the Gershwin musical *Of Thee I Sing*: "Wintergreen for President!/ Wintergreen for President!/ He's the man the people choose,/ Loves the Irish and the Jews. The latest immigrant tribe to really establish itself culturally and politically in the region are the South Asians who live in and around Edison, New Jersey. But they are a story for another day.

New England is characterized by a notable separation of religion from public life in general and electoral politics in particular. The explanation for this (by American standards) distinctive situation lies in the bitter struggle that ensued when the region's aboriginal white population, the Yankees, found themselves engulfed by Irish Catholic immigrants who flooded the region in the wake of the potato famines of the 1840s. A century of hostility was resolved, after World War II, by a tacit agreement to keep religion out of the public square. John F. Kennedy was an exemplar of that agreement, and in his famous campaign speech to the Houston ministerial association he, in effect, made a pitch for the New England way. To this day, New England politicians eschew religion on the stump, as borne witness to by the inability of Howard Dean and John Kerry to speak plausibly about the subject during the 2004 campaign. But nothing better conveys place of religion in the public life of New England than the story of the failure of the Massachusetts Catholic hierarchy to stop gay marriage from coming to the Bay State, even with Boston Archbishop Sean O'Malley pulling out all the stops.

The situation was that in 2004, after the commonwealth's highest court ordered same-sex marriage to be instituted, the state legislature, sitting as a constitutional convention, undertook to decide whether to approve placing a constitutional amendment banning such marriage. Yet despite the fact that seven of 10 Massachusetts legislators were Catholic, it didn't happen. One of them was Lowell Rep. Kevin Murphy, "a product of Catholic schools who attends Mass faithfully," who told the Lowell *Sun* said he would vote against constitutional amendments banning same-sex marriage because he understood the Supreme Judicial Court's action as a civil rights decision. "I obviously weighed what my church felt, but I also have to understand that as a public official, I represent all of the constituents of my district. I have to do what I believe is the right thing for all my constituents." Other Catholic legislators also applied this "inside/outside" logic. Thus, the Associated Press noted that state Sen. Martin Montigny would vote for gay marriage despite his church's teachings. "As a Catholic, I would never vote to diminish the sanctity of the church sacrament of marriage," Montigny said. "As a human being, I will never deny someone their equal rights. It is my belief that the only requirement of civil marriage is enduring love and respect." For many Catholic legislators and voters, it made a kind of local sense to express solidarity with Catholic understandings of sacramental marriage, while still voting to amend the constitution to permit civil unions for homosexuals, even if that left Archbishop O'Malley sputtering with frustration.

There is a millenarian dimension to Southern culture that is combined with a certain regional messianism: the South as redeemer region. This can be divided into white and African-American versions—two related but distinctly different civil religions, as it were. The one entails a vision of a society based on white supremacy (ante- and post-bellum); this other, combining black uplift with a more general realization of America's universal ideals of freedom and equality for all. That the one has, in a sense, supplanted the other is evident in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I have a Dream" speech, which has now replaced the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address as the best known patriotic (civil religious) text for American schoolchildren. This Southern African-American vision spread throughout the country with the great migration of blacks to the North, and you can hear it in these remarks of Barack Obama, from a 2004 interview with Cathleen

Falsani of the *Chicago Sun Times*: "...the Civil Rights movement has a powerful hold on me. It's a point in time where I think heaven and earth meet. Because it's a moment in which a collective faith transforms everything."

After the civil rights movement, the white South gradually moved to accept the new equality, substituting in the place of an embattled racial order an embattled patriarchal one. That's where the Religion Right comes in. But rather than tell another tale of Christian conservatism, I want to turn to revealing failed effort to bridge the divide between white and black civil religions in the South. In 2002, Alabama experienced a remarkable attempt to mobilize a biracial social justice campaign from conservative Christian impulses when Republican Governor Bob Riley tried to persuade Alabama voters to approve by referendum a \$1.2 billion tax increase to correct a state tax structure that he had concluded exploited the poor. "Jesus says one of our missions is to take care of the least among us," Riley said. Riley knew his Bible well, and voters could recall that he had been elected as a Bible-quoting religious right supporter as well as a conventional low-tax conservative Republican. A state financial crisis, as well as conscience, impelled him to propose the controversial tax increase. Riley had been converted to his tax reform proposal through the writings of Susan Pace Hamill, a University of Alabama law professor and Methodist, who drew from Christian ethics in condemning a regressive state tax structure that milked Alabama's poorest people at an 11 percent rate, compared to 4 percent for the wealthiest. "According to our Christian ethics," Riley said during his campaign for reform, "we're supposed to love God, love each other, and help take care of the poor." He insisted that it was "immoral to charge somebody making \$5,000 an income tax."

Riley's embrace of this neo-Social Gospel won him the support of the national Christian Coalition, now well into its post-Ralph Reed decline. But the organization's state chapter, the Christian Coalition of Alabama, would have none of it: "Alabama does not have a tax crisis. It has a spending crisis," thundered an eight-page "voter education" pamphlet distributed at Christian schools and bookstores, and at football games. "The road to a better future isn't paved with a tax increase." Riley tried to get Alabama pastors to trumpet his plan from their pulpits but in the end failed to persuade enough of them that a more equitable tax system was what Jesus would have wanted. While mainline Protestant groups did support the plan, white evangelical pastors did not, even going so far bring the doctrine of the "spirituality of the church" out of mothballs to plead that churches should stay out of politics. Needless to say, they didn't feel the same about church-based political activism when it came to "moral values" issues like abortion and gay rights. But the kiss of death was administered by black religious leaders, who, distrustful of Riley's conservative record, kept their distance from the initiative—thereby forming an odd Coalition of the Disengaged and Distrustful with their white brethren. And in the end, Alabama voters turned down the plan by a margin of two to one. Knowing the territory—being part of the territory—doesn't always work.

Compared to the South, the Southern Crossroads is an altogether harder-edged, more combative region. Its combativeness was born of conflict—not only between Protestant and Catholic but among Protestant sects. Change in the Crossroads comes about only

through struggle, and even those on the losing end don't tend to give up the fight. Campaigning for president, George W. Bush presented himself as a bipartisan peacemaker, but on taking office he became as divisive a president as we have ever had. What is it about this region? Ray Waddle, longtime religion writer for the *Nashville Tennessean* put it this way:

Growing up in the 60s in north Louisiana, I was always noticing the angry billboards:

GET US OUT OF THE U.N.!

JESUS IS COMING SOON--ARE YOU READY?

WATER FLUORIDATION ... A COMMUNIST PLOT.

These insistent messages were just a normal part of the scenery, like azaleas in bloom, icebox pies and LSU football. But the anger was puzzling. I saw it in letters to the editor, in leaflets left on the car windshield, in the scowls of TV preachers--attacks on "weak sister" liberals, blasts against secular humanism, detailed predictions of Armageddon.

Why were the adults so mad? What were they afraid of? It seemed out of proportion to the facts. No one could tell me why.

My part of America was always filled with gracious people, charming neighborhoods, and faithful churchgoing. But there was something else in the air—a cloud of political fierceness and aggressive Protestant argument. The very sky was a riddle of anxiety. We saw it as the staging area of a gathering apocalypse: Either Russian missiles would bear down on nearby Barksdale Air Base, or Christ himself would split the firmament in a final blaze of judgment, an ultimate furnace of truth.

It didn't occur to me until I left home that our brand of confrontational culture wasn't so normal after all. It was the strange brew of a specific religious and social past, an accident of history.

Although the Crossroads is far from the most populous of the regions, it has spawned many of the leading conservative culture warriors: James Dobson, descended from three generations of Louisiana Holiness preachers; Tom Delay; Karl Rove; John Ashcroft; Kenneth Starr. It specializes in social change at the point of a gun. If you doubt it, just ask the Iraqis.

The Pacific is the region of fluid spiritual identities, where people are expected to follow their own spiritual paths. In California, Madonna's involvement with a contemporary version of the ancient Jewish mystical practice called Kabbalah is seen as just part of her "spiritual practice." Back East, in the Middle Atlantic, they want to know whether Madonna has converted to Judaism. The Pacific sensibility shaped the counterculture of the "Sixties," and went on to shape late-20th-century culture as a whole. In many ways, the "nation of seekers" image of American religion was the Pacific writ large. Only after 9/11 was that image replaced by what we might call a Crossroads "spirituality."

The emblem of this shift was "the American Taliban," John Walker Lindh. Born in Washington D.C. in 1981, Lindh was the middle child of three in an apparently

unremarkable American family. His father worked as a lawyer for the U.S. Department of Justice while his mother was a home healthcare aide. The family moved to Marin County north of San Francisco in 1991, where Lindh went to an independent high school for self-directed learners before converting to Islam and dropping out at 16. He joined a mosque in San Francisco and changed his name to Suleyman al-Lindh and then to Suleyman al-Faris. The conversion came as a shock to his parents, but being religiously diverse themselves—father Catholic, mother a converted Buddhist—they soon accepted his choice. Late in 1998, he traveled to Yemen to study at the Yemeni Language Institute for a year, returned to Yemen in February of 2000, and later that year went to Pakistan. There he enrolled in a fundamentalist madrasa, or religious school, from which he proceeded to Afghanistan, training with al Qaeda and fighting with the Taliban against the Indians in Kashmir.

As eager as Americans were to condemn Lindh, they also sought an explanation for his choices—and found it in the Marin County lifestyle. One of the first CNN reports about him, aired on December 3, mentioned his teenage home as “a liberal area...where residents would be more likely to bear Birkenstocks than bear arms.” Shelby Steele wrote in the December 10, 2002 *Wall Street Journal* that Marin’s “post-’60s cultural liberalism” allowed a place where “traditional American history, culture and religion are without any special authority.” Jeff Jacoby of the *Boston Globe* charged on December 16 that, “if [Lindh’s parents] had been less concerned with flaunting their open-mindedness and more concerned with developing their son’s moral judgment, he wouldn’t be where he is today. His road to treason and jihad didn’t begin in Afghanistan. It began in Marin County, with parents who never said ‘no.’” Even former President George H. W. Bush was “so offended by John Lindh” that he called him a “misguided Marin County hot-tubber.”

What you will have noticed is that, in describing the Southern Crossroads and Pacific regions, I have moved from talking about how social change occurs, or doesn’t, within regions; to how particular spiritualities (so to speak) can serve, for better or worse, as agents of social change in a broader national (I won’t say global) context. So if we are to act globally while thinking locally (or at least regionally) what are our options for the future, at this juncture in our history?

Let’s start with the Pacific Northwest, the region of lowest religious affiliation. In November of 1994, by a 51 percent to 49 percent margin, Oregonians passed Measure 16, the Death with Dignity Act, making the state the first political jurisdiction in the country to legalize physician-assisted suicide. A similar measure had narrowly failed in Washington in 1991. Litigation delayed enactment of the measure until February of 1997 when the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals dismissed a suit objecting to the law. In a separate effort to block enactment, the 1997 Oregon legislature returned the measure to the ballot for reconsideration and repeal. Catholics and conservative evangelicals funded the \$4 million campaign for Measure 51. A coalition of moderates, liberals, and libertarians, organized as the “Don’t Let ’Em Shove Their Religion Down Your Throat Committee” spent \$1 million to oppose it. The campaign portrayed religion as an obstacle to individual freedom. That portrayal, and the newly inserted element of states’ rights

occasioned by federal efforts to block the initiative, contributed to Oregonians' reaffirming physician-assisted suicide by a 60-40 margin.

Both the 1994 and subsequent debates over the Death with Dignity Act focused on definitions of death as a "natural process," and on what assisted suicide does to familial and civic bonds. Opponents argued that physician-assisted suicide amounted to "playing God" and so would disrupt the natural processes of death. Proponents argued that it was no more disruptive of natural processes than the extraordinary measures taken to prolong life and chided opponents for viewing death as some kind of failure. Opponents expressed repeated concern that economic motivation would lead the poor, infirm, and other marginalized people to be pressured into ending their lives. Proponents argued that the law contained safeguards to protect against that and pointed to the economic status of those who have taken advantage of the law to support their claim.

What was telling was the way individuals with degenerative diseases who supported the law portrayed physician-assisted suicide as a profoundly natural process. In a deposition posted on the Death With Dignity fund Web site, "Katherine L" wrote: "I know the level of participation in life—mentally, spiritually, physically, emotionally—that I believe I need to continue as a valuable and contributing member of earth's family. I feel very strongly about preserving the right to make my final, very private choice of leaving this beautiful planet in peace, with dignity." Statements from family members of those who have chosen physician-assisted suicide described it as a profoundly communal process. As the children of a mother who died in 2001 put it in a posting on the Compassion in Dying Web site: "We were able to gather as a family, each kiss her, and each tell her how much we loved her. She died peacefully, looking out over the Willamette River, in a room filled with love. . . . [Our mother] was proud to be an Oregonian, to live in a state less bound by convention and more open to independent and free thinking."

These statements sought to resolve individual freedom, loving social relationships, and natural beauty into a moment of unity of human and natural environment. Humanity is represented as part of a larger natural process, with physician-assisted suicide portrayed as a moment of ethical choice by a free individual acting within a loving community. However much the statements may recast the events they describe, they situate people aesthetically and even theologically within nature, situate human life within planetary life. This vision is as distant as can be conceived from opponents' concept of assisted suicide as the act a technologically and economically repressive society within which individuals are isolated and alienated, social bonds destroyed, and humanity assaulted because its subjection to transcendent powers is not acknowledged. The conflict on its deepest level is about the proper understanding of relationships among individuals, society, and nature.

This account points to the centrality of nature and the environment in the Pacific Northwest. Indeed, environmentalism serves as the region's civil religion—a religion that actually serves to bring large portions of the religious and the "spiritual but not religious" communities together. Ecumenical action is bigger in the Northwest than anywhere else. All told, this is a model of a local spiritual ethos that might work for the broader country,

at least for a while. Certainly might have some appeal hereabouts. I note in this regard the Earth Week festivities held here in Boulder a couple of months ago. But it is nonetheless important to note the powerful opposition of evangelicals, who remain a significant and growing portion of the Northwest population, and who see Earth First environmentalism as a species of idolatry. The Northwest is, in my view, simply too secular for the rest of the country. Its environmentalist civil religion will travel only so far.

This region, the Mountain West, is best seen as an archipelago—nodes of civilizations set in a sacred landscape: Catholic missions in New Mexico and Arizona; the Mormon Zion in Utah; Indian sacred mountains scattered throughout. Colorado is a particularly interesting case in point. In our volume on the Mountain West, Phil Deloria (who grew up here) makes Boulder and Colorado Springs paradigmatic. Colorado Springs is where the Air Force Academy drew unto itself James Dobson and Focus on the Family, which begat Navigators and YoungLife, and so many others. In the process, some say, the city became the Vatican of American Evangelicalism. Actually, I think a better analogy is Salt Lake City, which combines the dedication to family values and evangelizing and patriotism in rather the same way. Both religious traditions trace their origins to the Second Great Awakening.

As for Boulder—well, I think I won't do more than quote a little more from Deloria: "Overestimating the power of Naropa in setting Boulder's cultural tone would be difficult." Not that he is an uncritical admirer of this city: "Its residents can be dogmatic and prescriptive in insisting on their particular brand of tolerance." Perhaps you even know what he's talking about.

The larger point here is that the Mountain West model is enclaves fighting over sacred space some of the time, and at other times happy to retreat into their own worlds, with a certain libertarian live-and-let-live mentality—whether it's Native Americans or Mormons or Fundamentalist Mormons or Survivalists or Catholic monks or Biosphere Two people. John McCain does seem to me a good representative of this region, and I mean this in a positive as well as a not-so-positive sense. Attractive as the libertarian approach to life may be, there is probably no regional cultural style less capable of generating collective global action. Good luck with it, but I think the country would do better to look elsewhere.

Where else is there? Well, there's one region left—the Midwest. We did encounter a particular problem with this part of our regions project. Uniquely, the Midwest team resisted seeing theirs as a distinctive region; like the Midwesterners most of them were, they saw it as just plain old America. And that's the Midwest style. The American religious historian Mark Noll, who wrote the chapter on Protestants in the region, detected an underlying Methodist strain in the Midwestern sensibility, and I am persuaded that he's right.

This Methodist spiritual DNA, emphasizing personal spiritual discipline (as the more conservative evangelical denominations do) and social reform (as the rest of the liberal mainline denominations do), seems to me well calibrated for a society that, here at the

beginning of the 21st century, seems anxious to combine moderately conservative views on social issues like abortion, school prayer, pornography, and the “traditional family” with moderately liberal views on economic issues such as social welfare spending and health care. Hillary Clinton, an Illinois Methodist, might have been quoting an African proverb when she wrote that it took a village to raise a child, but the values it expressed were very much home grown. Likewise, Illinois Senator Barack Obama’s determination to run for the 2008 Democratic nomination on a platform of bringing people together was very much in keeping with his Midwestern identity—though his own spiritual journey began in the fluid Pacific state of Hawaii, and seemed, finally, to have arrived in the South of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Such hybridity is not out of place, however, because the Midwest is where the country comes together now. It is the place with the largest political deviations—from deep red states like Kansas and Nebraska to the deep-blue state of Illinois to the swingiest of swing states—Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Iowa. Although it is far from the most religiously diverse region, it is the one where the country’s main religious players all have strong hands to play. Evangelical Protestants are a powerful and growing presence, but nowhere does the Protestant Mainline retain so much of its historic strength and influence. For their part, Catholics are as well represented there as they are in the country as a whole, and Jews are big players in the region’s big metropolitan areas. Nor does it seem entirely accidental that the first two Muslim members of Congress should come from the Midwest.

The first of these, Keith Ellison converted to Islam as a 19-year-old in his native Detroit, and in 2006 won in the fifth district of Minnesota (Minneapolis and St. Paul) on a strong antiwar platform. “We were able to bring in Muslims, Christians, Jews, Buddhists,” Ellison said after the election. “We brought in everybody.” If there is to be a new spiritual style underlying America’s acting in the new global environment, there is something to be said for having it emerge from a Midwestern locale.

Let me conclude by saying that particular spiritual ideologies are always going to be coming to the fore in a nation like ours, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. But if we believe in human diversity, in human choice—by which I mean, in pluralism and democracy—then we need to be open to, or at least sensitive to, other points of view, sometimes because this is necessary in order to achieve our ends and sometimes out of a humble recognition that every now and then, in some respect or other, it’s just possible that we ourselves might not have gotten it quite right.

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