

## Responses to the Religion Singularity: A Rejoinder

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*Abstract:* Since the publication of Kenneth Howard's 2017 article, "The Religion Singularity: A Demographic Crisis Destabilizing and Transforming Institutional Christianity," there has been an increasing demand to understand the root causes and historical foundations for why institutional Christianity is in a state of de-institutionalization. In response to Howard's research, a number of authors have sought to provide a contextual explanation for why the religion singularity is currently happening, including studies in epistemology, church history, psychology, anthropology, and church ministry. The purpose of this article is to offer a brief survey and response to these interactions with Howard's research, identifying the overall implications of each researcher's perspective for understanding the religion singularity phenomenon. It explores factors relating to denominational switching in Jeshua Branch's research, social memory in John Lingelbach's essay, religious politics in Kevin Seybold's survey, scientific reductionism in Jack David Eller's position paper, and institutional moral failure in Brian McLaren's article.

*Keywords:* Religion Singularity, Denominational Switching, Social Memory, Religious Politics, Scientific Reductionism, Christian Judgmentalism

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### Introduction

SINCE THE PUBLICATION OF Kenneth Howard's 2017 article, "The Religion Singularity: A Demographic Crisis Destabilizing and Transforming Institutional Christianity," there has been an increasing demand to understand the root causes and historical foundations for why institutional Christianity is, in a word, dying.<sup>1</sup> The trend toward non-institutional and fragmentary forms of religiosity is occurring not only in the West but across the globe, as well. What Howard's research indicates is that the percentage increase of new Christian denominations and worship centers is actually outpacing the plateaued percentage of Christian believers around the world. The inference being that churches and denominations are fragmenting (i.e. internally dividing due to conflict or other factors) faster than they are growing.<sup>2</sup> At its current rate of disintegration, institutional Christianity will have fragmented

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, Darren M. Slade, "Religious Homophily and Biblicism: A Theory of Conservative Church Fragmentation," *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 9, no. 1 (2019): 13–28, <http://dx.doi.org/10.18848/2154-8633/cgp/v09i01/13-28>.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. C. Kirk Hadaway, "Is Evangelistic Activity Related to Church Growth?," in *Church and Denominational Growth*, ed. David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1993), 169–87.

itself into near extinction by the end of the twenty-first century, having been reduced to miniscule and, thus, financially unsustainable and culturally uninfluential congregational tribes (the “religion singularity”).<sup>3</sup> In response to Howard’s global and multi-denominational datasets, a number of researchers have sought to provide a contextual explanation for the religion singularity’s emergence, including studies in epistemology, church history, psychology, anthropology, and church ministry. The purpose of this article is to offer a brief survey and response to these interactions with Howard’s article, identifying the overall implications of each researcher’s perspective for understanding the religion singularity phenomenon. It begins with a response to Jeshua Branch’s epistemological approach to the subject matter.

### Denominational Switching: A Response to Jeshua Branch

In Branch’s article, “Grenz and Franke’s Post-Foundationalism and the Religion Singularity,” the author draws on the work of Stanley Grenz and John Franke (two prominent intellectuals who discuss Christianity’s paradigm shift from modernity to postmodernity) to provide an epistemological context for the church’s current destabilizing trend. Branch argues that the erosion of foundationalist principles that once sought absolute epistemological certainty has caused the emergence of post-foundationalism, which embraces diversity in theological beliefs. Dogmatic formulas and denominational allegiances no longer have the same social impact that they once did when Enlightenment attitudes permeated the church in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For Branch, it was strong foundationalism (as an arrogant epistemology) that incited internal conflict and division, forcing churches to break off into more and more competing congregations. However, as people became less enchanted with possessing or proclaiming absolute truth, the institutional nature of Christianity (in its various forms across the different sects) became less authoritative.<sup>4</sup> The result, according to Branch, is a trend toward nondenominational house churches that are less building-centric and less dependent on official ecclesial organization.<sup>5</sup>

Branch’s article is an appropriate starting point for understanding the religion singularity by addressing the epistemological paradigms that may have aggravated denominational infighting, though we disagree with his presumption that institutional fragmentation may eventually subside in the future.<sup>6</sup> What is most interesting is his suggestion that post-foundationalist congregations attempt to curb theological division by openly embracing religious diversity (though, not necessarily religious pluralism). Of course, those who continue to advocate or practice Enlightenment-based foundationalism would likely argue that the paradigm shift into relative certainty (or wholesale uncertainty) is itself the root cause of Christianity’s current problems.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, it is unlikely that post-foundationalism will

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<sup>3</sup> Kenneth W. Howard, “The Religion Singularity: A Demographic Crisis Destabilizing and Transforming Institutional Christianity,” *International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 7, no. 2 (2017): 77–93, <http://dx.doi.org/10.18848/2154-8633/cgp/v07i02/77-93>.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2012), esp. 11–99.

<sup>5</sup> Jeshua B. Branch, “Grenz and Franke’s Post-Foundationalism and the Religion Singularity,” *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.33929/sherm.2019.vol1.no1.01>.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Slade, “Religious Homophily and Biblicism,” 18–23.

<sup>7</sup> See for example, Phil Johnson, “You Can’t Handle the Truth: The Sinful Tolerance of Postmodernism,” *The Journal of Modern Ministry* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 219–45 and John F. MacArthur Jr., *The Truth War: Fighting for Certainty in an Age of Deception* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007).

Ultimately, congregations that grow numerically display stronger institutional allegiances, promote a clearer sense of purpose, and emphasize mutual responsibility of evangelistic efforts among their members. They tend to avoid or at least quickly resolve, internal conflict among its members, and have an overall fervent determination to flourish as a church. Likewise, older congregations fail to assimilate new members into their established systems, making younger churches more likely to grow than their older equivalents. Nonetheless, a congregation's eventual growth depends significantly, if not almost entirely, on the socio-economic demographics of its surrounding environment, as well as its outward focus toward the community.<sup>89</sup> In other words, the most predominant factor for predicting church growth is socioeconomic advantages and outreach. With access to higher education, reproductive choices and family planning, career opportunities, cost of living increases, and lifestyle choices comes the inevitable drop in birth rates among developed nations. Liberal denominations suffered the biggest drop in birth rates largely due to their members' educational and social achievements. At the same time, conservative churches have more effectively indoctrinated their children to maintain their religious tradition even into adulthood, as well as "training" their congregants to proselytize more than their liberal counterparts.<sup>90</sup> The point is that numerous socio-political and economic changes in Western culture (and eventually the entire world) have contributed to the growth and decline of individual congregations over the last century, whereas before they were more stable. When compounded over just a few generations, these factors soon intensified to proliferate the rapid increase in both denominations and worship centers. The inevitable result is the "religion singularity." What now remains to be seen is whether and how institutional Christianity will adapt to this change and in what form (if any) it will survive.

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<sup>89</sup> See the seven analyses of congregational growth and decline in David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway, eds., *Church and Denominational Growth* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 135–240.

<sup>90</sup> See Hadaway and Marler, "Growth and Decline in the Mainline," 1–24.

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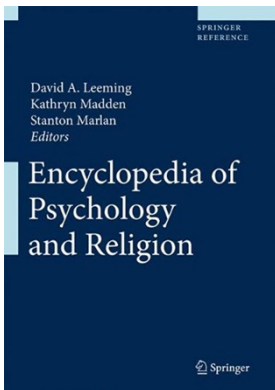
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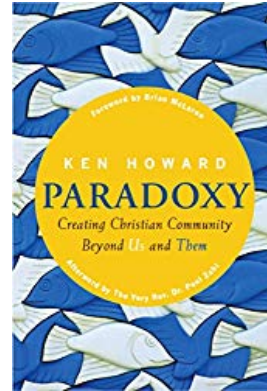


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*Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion*  
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Darren M. Slade



*Paradoxy: Creating Christian  
Community Beyond Us and Them*  
(2016, FaithX)

Kenneth W. Howard

