

A Cultural Cognition Perspective on Religion Singularity: How Political Identity Influences Religious Affiliation

A Position Paper by

Kevin S. Seybold,
Grove City College

Editor's Note: The "Position Paper" is a unique feature to SHERM journal where hand-selected scholars are invited to write their particular standpoint or attitude on a specific issue. The position paper is intended to engender support for the paper's argument. However, in contrast to a simple op-ed piece, the academic nature of this position paper derives its argumentation from facts, verifiable data, and/or the author's training and experience as a scholar in a particular field of study.

In this case, the author was asked to answer the following question: Assuming the "religion singularity" phenomenon is, in fact, occurring in institutional Christianity today, what do you believe is the primary cause(s) for this phenomenon's occurrence?

Abstract: Kenneth Howard argues in his paper, "The Religion Singularity," that institutional Christianity has experienced and will continue to experience an increase in the number of denominations and individual worship centers, which, along with a slower increase in the number of Christians in the US, will make institutional Christianity unsustainable in its current form. While there are, no doubt, many reasons why this religion singularity has or will take place, this paper examines the role of cultural cognition on the trends reported in Howard's article. Cultural commitments and values, such as group membership and identity, influence the position individuals take on a variety of religious and political topics, which can then lead to polarization on these issues within the broader society. While we might expect that religious affiliations play an important role in determining a person's political views, this article seeks to identify whether the reverse is also true, namely the extent to which political views affect an individual's religious affiliation. This article reviews research that suggests the increasing political polarization in the United States over the past few decades has contributed, along with other factors, to the religion singularity reported by Howard.

Keywords: Cultural Cognition, Religion Singularity, Politics, Group Identity, Ideology, Polarization

KENNETH HOWARD'S ARTICLE ON the "religion singularity" describes demographic trends that he argues will make "institutional Christianity unsustainable in its current forms."¹ These trends include a rapid increase in the number of denominations and individual worship centers along with a steady but slower increase in the number of Christians globally. A religion singularity occurred once the increase in worship centers and denominations exceeded the increase in number of new Christians. Howard argues that, along with the rising number of "nones" and religiously unaffiliated in the United States, this differential will drive the congregational size of denominations and worship centers down to potentially unsustainable levels by the end of the

¹ 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): 90, <http://dx.doi.org/10.18848/2154-8633/cgp/v07i02/77-93>.

twenty-first century.² According to Howard's analysis of the data, institutional Christianity will have to adjust if it expects to survive in a healthy form in the years to come.

If Howard is accurate and a religion singularity has occurred (or will soon take place), what might account for these patterns that threaten institutional Christianity? Specifically, why was there such an increase in denominational fragmentation, from 9,300 to 34,200 (according to Howard's data) during the second half of the twentieth century?³ In the social sciences, there frequently exists many potential causes for a particular phenomenon, and there are likely several factors driving the singularity trend Howard identifies. The purpose of this position paper is to examine the religion singularity from the perspective of cultural cognition, which refers to processes whereby cultural commitments and values (e.g. group membership and identity) influences the position a person adopts on a particular issue, such as gun control, climate change, same-sex marriage, etc. These cultural commitments act as a type of heuristic framework through which individuals assess data in order to form their opinions. In the context of religion singularity, perhaps growth in the number of denominations and worship centers over the past few decades is attributable to the increased political and religious polarization of the US population. We can conceptualize denominations and worship centers as social institutions that provide an individual with a sense of social identity. If people are making decisions about which religious group they will join on the basis of political (as well as religious) orientation, then the fragmentation and increasing number of denominations and centers of worship might actually reflect the increasing political polarization found in the United States. In other words, religious sorting occurs because partisans may select into politically like-minded social groups.⁴

Many factors can contribute to our sense of group identity, such as national, ethnic, and religious groups.⁵ As social beings, humans need to affiliate with others for survival. Over the course of human history, the size of these groups has increased from small hunter-gathering groups to large nation states. Our minds evolved, in part, to facilitate the formation and maintenance of tribal in-groups; our brains are built for tribal life.⁶ Certain cognitive processes function to differentiate the in-group ("us") from the out-group ("them"). As a result, we tend to accept the reliability of new information only if it is consistent with what we already believe to be true (a "biased assimilation" or "confirmation bias"). We also view beliefs held by our in-group as being objective and correct while beliefs held by out-groups as biased and erroneous ("naïve realism"), and we automatically dismiss evidence presented by the out-group before fully considering it ("reactive devaluation"). These biases in information processing are examples of motivated reasoning or cognition—the tendency of individuals to conform their evaluation of data in order to remain consistent with a stated goal or purpose that is oftentimes unrelated to factual accuracy.⁷ Regularly, that goal or purpose is to be consistent with the thinking of the in-group.

² Howard, "The Religion Singularity," 77.

³ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁴ Michele F. Margolis, *From Politics to the Pews How Partisanship and the Political Environment Shape Religious Identity* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 200, <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226555812.001.0001>.

⁵ Andrew L. Whitehead and Christopher P. Scheitle, "We the (Christian) People: Christianity and American Identity from 1996 to 2014," *Social Currents* 5, no. 2 (2018): 157–72, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/2329496517725333>.

⁶ Joshua D. Greene, *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap Between Us and Them* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), 69.

⁷ Kevin S. Seybold, *Questions in the Psychology of Religion* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), 175.

surpassed by the number of denominations and/or individual worship centers. Many factors no doubt influence the increasing number of worship centers in America. The literature reviewed in this paper suggests that among these factors is political partisanship. People affiliate with a particular denomination or worship center, in part, because of a perceived similarity between the individual's political identity and the political orientation of their congregation. People are selecting their religious identities on the basis of politics. As the United States has become more politically polarized over the past few decades, this polarization has likely contributed to the acceleration in denominational divisions and worship centers that make up the religion singularity. From the perspective of cultural cognition, group memberships and other cultural commitments influence the position a person takes on various issues. The work of Margolis and others described above suggests that it is often the cultural commitments of political membership and identity that influence religious perspectives and affiliations. If these authors' interpretation of the data is accurate, then the religion singularity and the rise in denominations and worship centers goes beyond religion *per se* to include other cultural forces, not the least of which is political partisanship.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

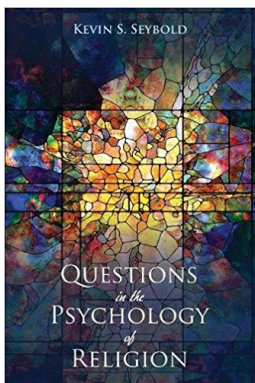
- Djupe, Paul A., Jacob R. Neiheisel, and Anand E. Sokhey. "Reconsidering the Role of Politics in Leaving Religion: The Importance of Affiliation." *American Journal of Political Science* 62, no. 1 (2018): 161–75. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12308>.
- Djupe, Paul A., Jacob R. Neiheisel, and Kimberly H. Conger. "Are the Politics of the Christian Right Linked to State Rates of the Nonreligious? The Importance of Salient Controversy." *Political Research Quarterly* 71, no. 4 (2018): 910–22. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1065912918771526>.
- Greene, Joshua D. *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap Between Us and Them*. New York: Penguin Books, 2013.
- Hout, Michael, and Claude S. Fischer. "Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Politics and Generations." *American Sociological Review* 67, no. 2 (April 2002): 165–90. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3088891>.
- Howard, Kenneth W. "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>.
- Jones, Robert P., Daniel Cox, Betsy Cooper, and Rachel Lienesch. *Exodus: Why Americans are Leaving Religion—and Why They're Unlikely to Come Back*. Washington, DC: Public Religion Research Institute, 2016. <https://www.prrri.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/PRRI-RNS-Unaffiliated-Report.pdf>.
- Margolis, Michele F. *From Politics to the Pews How Partisanship and the Political Environment Shape Religious Identity*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226555812.001.0001>.
- Mason, Lillian. "Ideologues Without Issues: The Polarizing Consequences of Ideological Identities." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 82, no. S1 (2018): 866–87. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfy005>.
- McLaren, Brian D. "Conditions for the Great Religion Singularity." *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 40–49. <https://doi.org/10.33929/sherm.2019.vol1.no1.05>.
- Patrikos, Stratos. "American Republican Religion? Disentangling the Causal Link Between Religion and Politics in the Us." *Political Behavior* 30, no. 3 (2008): 367–89. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11109-008-9053-1>.

- Schnabel, Landon, and Sean Bock. "The Persistent and Exceptional Intensity of American Religion: A Response to Recent Research." *Sociological Science* 4 (2017): 686–700. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15195/v4.a28>.
- Seybold, Kevin S. *Questions in the Psychology of Religion*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017.
- Slade, Darren M. "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>.
- Warf, Barney, and Morton Winsberg. "Geographies of Megachurches in the United States." *Journal of Cultural Geography* 27, no. 1 (2010): 33–51. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08873631003593216>.
- Whitehead, Andrew L., and Christopher P. Scheitle. "We the (Christian) People: Christianity and American Identity from 1996 to 2014." *Social Currents* 5, no. 2 (2018): 157–72. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/2329496517725333>.
- Whitehead, Andrew L., Samuel L. Perry, and Joseph O. Baker. "Make America Christian Again: Christian Nationalism and Voting for Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election." *Sociology of Religion* 79, no. 2 (2018): 147–71. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srx070>.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

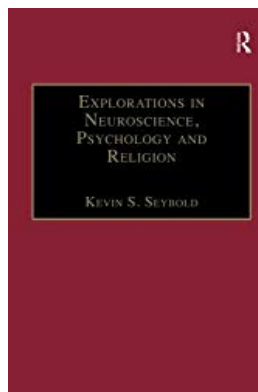
[Kevin S. Seybold](#) is professor of psychology at Grove City College where he teaches courses in behavioral neuroscience, cognition, and the psychology of religion. A graduate of Greenville College (B.A.) and Marquette University (M.A.), he received his Ph.D. in physiological psychology from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Seybold has published articles in *Physiology & Behavior*, the *International Journal of Neuroscience*, *Biological Psychiatry*, *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, the *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, and the *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* among others. He is the author of *Explorations in Neuroscience, Psychology and Religion* (2007) and *Questions in the Psychology of Religion* (2017).

MORE FROM THE AUTHOR



Questions in the Psychology of Religion
(2017, Cascade Books)

Kevin S. Seybold



*Explorations in Neuroscience,
Psychology and Religion*
(2007, Routledge)

Kevin S. Seybold

