

## Is the Disintegration of Christianity a Problem— or Even a Surprise?

*A Position Paper by*

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*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:* This article argues that if Kenneth Howard's prediction of a “religion singularity” is true, it should not be a worry for social scientists, who must remain neutral on religious matters. Further, the deinstitutionalization, fragmentation, atomization, and even extinction of religion should come as no surprise to scholars who have observed these processes repeatedly. This process occurs not only in the realm of religion but in all social domains, from family and marriage to government—and indeed not only in social domains but in the natural world, as well. Contemporary forces of mediatization and neoliberalism are only the latest threats to institutional membership, creating a crisis among established authorities and encouraging “irregular” religion just as much as they encourage “irregular” employment. While the “religious economy” model suggests an adaptation of religion to the tastes and preferences of today's religious consumer, ethnographic evidence illustrates the difference between religious institutions and religiosity, the rise of multiple small religious movements, and the struggle for survival between sects, denominations, and churches. Ultimately it may be the case that the institutional phase of Christianity was only one moment in its religious evolution, which evolved from small, local, independent congregations and may return to—or end in—that form.

*Keywords:* deinstitutionalization, religious movement, religious economy, religious evolution, crisis of authority, religion singularity

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WHEN I WAS DOING anthropological fieldwork in Australia in the late 1980s, I discovered a small Pentecostal outpost in the Aboriginal community of Yuendumu. When I say “small,” I mean *five active members*, all of them young adult men, as well as two organizers from outside the community. Aside from its very (and unlikely) existence, the congregation was noteworthy in two ways. First, it was predictably plugged into global charismatic Christian movements; for instance, receiving literature and videos from Jimmy Swaggart's ministry. Second, it was understandably quite divisive among the Warlpiri residents of Yuendumu, many of whom were nominal Baptists due to the origin of the settlement as a Baptist mission. We might even say that this division was experienced as a “crisis,” drawing members away from the dominant, virtually monopolistic Yuendumu Baptist church while driving wedges between kin.

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The situation in Yuendumu can perhaps be construed as a moment in the inexorable march toward Kenneth Howard's "religion singularity," as it posed a potential demographic calamity for, and threatened to destabilize and transform institutional (Baptist) Christianity in Warlpiri society. Anthropologists have long noted the proliferation of small, independent, and often decidedly unorthodox sects and churches. Some of these movements have striven for, and achieved to some degree, institutional (or what Howard calls "denominational") status, like the Presbyterian Church of Ghana. Most strikingly, this denomination launched an American branch, the Presbyterian Church of Ghana in New York (PCGNY) as an "overseas mission" with the goal "to propagate the message and mission of the Christian church in the United States through its own brand of Ghanaian presbyterianism [*sic*]"<sup>1</sup>—as if the United States was not already, or not sufficiently or correctly, Christian! On the other hand, David Martin notes that many Pentecostal and other Protestant congregations have the character of "local house groups and store-front churches" founded and operated by "religious entrepreneurs," some of whom endure while many store-fronts, if not most, do not.<sup>2</sup>

In the following short commentary, I do not intend to dispute Howard's conclusions or quibble with his math. It may well be that institutional Christianity is heading toward a "singularity" (not the term I would use), a vanishing point of dis-integration where each congregation has just one member. Nor will I be critiquing the truth-claims of any particular Christian sect or of Christianity as such. Whether Christianity—or more accurately, one version or another of Christianity—is true or false, or whether a supreme being is driving or allowing doctrinal and congregational proliferation, is quite irrelevant to the social fact of that proliferation. I will instead be making two general sociological points. First, as (ideally) neutral scholars, we cannot be alarmed about the "religion singularity." Our job is to watch, record, and explain; only partisans will take pleasure or pain in any particular outcome. Second, and more importantly, as informed observers of cultural processes, we should not be surprised by evolutionary changes—including critical or fatal changes—in the institutional structure of religion because such processes have been in effect since the dawn of religion and indeed are not restricted to religion or even to culture. It is purely evolution.

Howard writes with an urgent tone as he predicts the decline of institutional Christianity; although, it is not clear that the future of the religion "looking more like it did in the first century than at any time since: more diverse and less hierarchical, more faith than religion, and more a movement than an institution" is necessarily a bad thing.<sup>3</sup> After all, many Christian fundamentalists today and in the past aspired to return Christianity to its "primitive church" roots. As objective and nonpartisan chroniclers of religious change, we cannot indulge in angst. Yet, we can imagine that great distress was, indeed, felt by sixteenth century Catholics in the face of the Protestant onslaught, by ancient Romans as they lost ground to insurgent Christians, and by Jews who watched the early Jesus movement forever fracture "God's People" and the Nation of Israel.

And that is the real point that I want to make. Even if contemporary Christianity is in a state of profound transformation, there is nothing new happening here. At least since Martin

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<sup>1</sup> Moses O. Biney, *From Africa to America: Religion and Adaptation among Ghanaian Immigrants in New York* (New York: NYU Press, 2011), 68, <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9780814786390.001.0001>.

<sup>2</sup> David Martin, "Pentecostalism: An Alternative Form of Modernity and Modernization?" in *Global Pentecostalism in the 21st Century*, ed. Robert W. Hefner (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), 37–62.

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

I think we can safely say, to paraphrase Mark Twain, that the reports of the death of Christianity are greatly exaggerated. More likely, if present trends continue with the “religion singularity,” and if present cultural circumstances persist or intensify, the dinosaurs of church institutions (Howard’s denominations) may perish, to be replaced by less-impressive successors like lizards and chickens. Indeed, there are more lizards and chickens today than there ever were dinosaurs. Future Christianity may look nothing like its familiar institutional form, but then that form looked nothing like its original form. And if institutional Christianity should become so atomized that it fades entirely into that good night, then it is nothing that objective scholars should celebrate or lament any more than the extinction of Druidism or Norse religion (both of which, incidentally, live on in various incarnations of neo-paganism). All things evolve, and all things pass: it is the natural (and cultural) order of the world.

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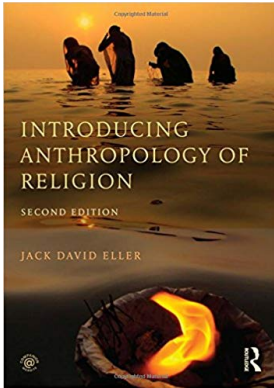
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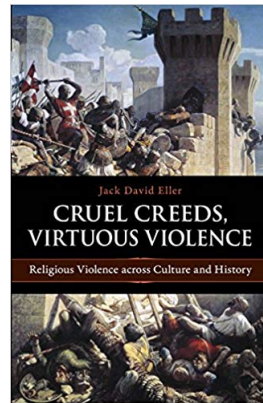
[Jack David Eller](#) holds a PhD in anthropology and has conducted fieldwork on religion and religious change among Australian Aboriginals. His other areas of interest include ethnic and religious violence, and he is the author of a number of books on cultural anthropology, anthropology of religion, psychological anthropology, and atheism/secularism.

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