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

A Position Paper by

Jack David Eller,
Community College of Denver

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.

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*]"[1]—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.[2]

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.[3] 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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[1] 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.

[2] 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.

[3] 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.

Luther tacked up his Ninety-Five Theses, Christianity has been in a constant state of decentralization and multiplication. Where there was once a single supposedly "catholic" church, there were now two, then three, then thousands. In fact, as anyone acquainted with Christian history must immediately grant, Christianity has never been centralized or fully institutionalized, regardless if we consider the early disagreements and controversies over Marcionism, Arianism, Docetism, *ad infinitum*; the Great Schism of Western and Eastern/Orthodox churches; or the manifold medieval heresies of the Cathars, the Waldensians, the Hussites, the Bogomils, and so forth.[4] Martin Luther merely broke the alleged monopoly of the Catholic Church once and for all.

Lutheranism opened the floodgate of protest movements with its insistence on "conscience" and *sola scriptura*, on which no consensus existed. "Every man his own priest" portends with centrifugal certainty to the evacuation of the center and, at its extreme, to the church-of-one. Protestantism was and remains the license to start a new "worship center" (in Howard's terminology) which may grow into a sect, a denomination, or even a religion. The process that Howard bemoans has been the regular state of Christianity for half a millennium; although, if he is right, it is reaching its logical end.

Not only is the fragmentation of institutional Christianity old and common by now, but the phenomenon is in no way unique to that religion. The unity of Judaism ended, if it ever existed, with the fall of the Temple. Without a central focal point of worship or a single professional priesthood, the synagogue tradition developed, with a myriad of local congregations led by rabbis and a number of general schools of Judaism including reform, liberal, and orthodox.[5] Islam split early into Sunni and Shia branches and is currently undergoing its own crisis of dissolution-through-multiplication as new movements, interpretations, and leaders splinter the *umma*. Entire new religions have burst from the shells of the old, including Sikhism and Baha'i. In the case of Islam—and probably with instructive value for other religions—the issue is not so much a crisis of demographics as a crisis of *authority* since, for example, the *'ulema* of Al-Azhar University no longer possess the sole authority to speak for the faith.[6] Traditional institutions and elites have lost control as religion, whether it is Islam, Christianity, or any other system, has become increasingly "popularized" in the sense of being "of, by, and for the people," who have understandably taken it in unprecedented directions. This evolution occurs much to the consternation of traditional religious leaders and experts, not to mention state elites who often attempt to promote, control, or coopt "official" religion in the service of the state.

Interestingly, a similar anxiety has gripped the atheist community in the United States where there was once perhaps a dream of a single unified organization and voice for the godless. For a moment, that voice was Madalyn Murray O'Hair and the organization was American

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[4] On the divisions and disputes within early Christianity, see Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, 2nd ed., ed. and trans. Robert A. Kraft and Gerhard Krodel (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971) and James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1977).

[5] On the history of Judaism after the destruction of the second temple, see Solomon Grayzel, *A History of the Jews: From the Babylonian Exile to the Present* (New York: The New American Library, 1968).

[6] On the intellectual and institutional history of modern Islam, see for example, Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511801990.

Atheists; but when Freedom from Religion Foundation broke away, the movement was cleft with further fissures in the form of Atheist Alliance International, Secular Student Alliance, Freethought Society, and so on and so forth, not to mention many local unaffiliated groups and movements. One might wonder, despite the documented growth of the atheist/agnostic/humanist/secularist/none/done category (and note how this population cannot even settle on a name!), whether it too is confronting a singularity of group expansion outpacing population growth.

Admittedly, the catastrophe may be more acute for institutional Christianity than for other religions (and non-religious aspects of culture) precisely because Christianity yearned for, and temporarily appeared to achieve, centralization on a scale that no other religion has accomplished. There is nothing like a Pope or Catholic Church in Judaism or Islam, let alone in Hinduism or Buddhism. This is not to say that there is no longing in other religions for unity, as in the Islamic vision of the caliphate; it is to say, however, that whatever unity they can reference is in the distant past or the remote future, if not the pure imagination (for instance, the *salafiyyah*, the "pious predecessors" or first generation of Muhammad's followers, playing the same role for Muslims that the primitive church plays for Christians). So, the dissolution of institutional Christianity no doubt feels more foreign and direr than it would with other religions. But, as we just established, the centralization and institutionalization of Christianity was always something of an ideal and an ideology rather than a fact.

This brings me to my fundamental point. Anthropology, as well as a close and honest study of religion in general, teaches us that religions (and the wider cultures within which they are set and into which they are integrated) are not eternal stable entities but are mobile, constructed, and *evolving* things like any natural species.[7] Moreover, the same general processes found in organic evolution also occur in sociocultural evolution. New forms emerge (speciation) and old forms disappear (extinction). In between, forms are continuously changing in adaptation to their environment, physical and social, or by sheer random mutation. Institutions, like Howard's "denominations," routinely shoot off new branches (every denomination *was* a new branch at one time), and they swap DNA with other religions, denominations, sects, and cults and with non-religious aspects of culture.[8] How else can we explain Mormonism, absorbing themes from American and Native American history into the overall Christian narrative, or "Heaven's Gate" (formally, TELAH or The Evolutionary Level Above Human), the suicide cult that mixed loosely Christian ideas with computer technology, ufology, and *Star Trek* (calling the previous and current alien landing parties among us "away teams")?[9]

So, the broad evolutionary processes of speciation, hybridization, and extinction are as normal in culture—and religion is nothing more than a domain of culture—as in nature. Christianity itself was obviously a bud off the stalk of Judaism; and as it developed over the centuries, it soaked up elements from Greco-Roman, Germanic and Nordic, and other cultures that it encountered. As the Ghanaian Presbyterian church illustrates, this evolutionary process is hardly finished and never will be. Indeed, Catholic authorities have explicitly recognized "inculturation" as a valid strategy for Christianity. Aylward Shorter, a Catholic "mission

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[7] David Eller, "Christianity Evolving: On the Origin of Christian Species," in *The End of Christianity*, ed. John W. Loftus (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2011), 23–51.

[8] Cf. 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.

[9] See Jack David Eller, *Introducing Anthropology of Religion: Culture to the Ultimate*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315740157.

anthropologist," cites Pedro Arrupe's concept of inculturation in his book, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*:

> the incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question (this alone would be no more than a superficial adaptation) but becomes a principle that animates, directs, and unifies the culture, transforming it and remaking it so as to bring about a "new creation."[10]

As he added, this tactic implies "that the Christian message transforms a culture. It is also the case that Christianity is transformed by culture."[11]

This inculturation means that Christians and scholars can expressly expect—and the Catholic Church has actually encouraged—that local Christianities will vary. A case in point is the Aymara, an indigenous people of Bolivia, where Catholic missionaries aided the natives to find "a way of being Aymara the way that Jesus would have been Aymara"[12] and to go so far as "to live and write their own Aymara New Testament."[13] Call it syncretism or hybridization, but inculturation is an invitation to add one more Christianity to the legion of Christianities.

As we also emphasized above, while such creativity has always been a live (although often heretical) possibility in Christianity, Protestantism legitimized it in a way from which there was no turning back. Protestantism is not an institution but a style or attitude, and that very non-institutional and anti-institutional spirit empowered individuals to start as many denominations, sects, and worship centers as they like. Granted, some Protestant movements have sought to re-impose a degree of institutional order, as in the Anglican Church or various Baptist conventions, but the schismatic cat has long been out of the bag, and there will never again be Christian unanimity or Lewisian "mere Christianity" (if there ever was unanimity).

Indeed, to extend our evolutionary analysis, we might consider the big, long-term institutions like the Catholic Church to be the exceptions in the evolutionary history of Christianity and of religion in general. As is well known, most religions lack any such institutional form (a few like Cao Dai in Vietnam have tried to emulate it), and even in the Christian context it may be better understood as one form among many. In fact, *institutional* Christianity appears to be more of a momentary aberration in the larger evolutionary development of religion than it has been *the* form or model of faith. Denominations in Howard's sense may then be the mega-fauna that roamed and ruled the earth for a time but, like all living things, were destined to come to an end and perhaps be replaced by humbler descendants. So—not to press the analogy too far—what we might be observing with the "religion singularity" is less a Permian Dying than a Cambrian Explosion of religion.

Another way to think about the problem that Howard identifies is Rodney Stark's "religious economy" model. Largely putting an economic façade on an evolutionary process, Stark recommended that we perceive religion as just another good that is produced, marketed,

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[10] Cited in Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Eugene, OR.: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 11.
[11] Ibid., 14.
[12] Andrew Orta, "Converting Difference: Metaculture, Missionaries, and the Politics of Locality," *Ethnology* 37, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 165–85, http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3774002.
[13] Ibid., 172.

sold, bought, and consumed. In this scheme, religions and/or their constituent parts (churches, denominations, worship centers, etc.) are "firms" that offer a supply of religion to customers. Notwithstanding his questionable assumption that there is a constant demand for such products (the rise of religious Nones-and-Dones upsets that assumption), Stark maintained that the best kind of religious market was a *free* religious market, where each religious firm "caters to the special needs and tastes of specific market segments."[14] Note that Stark and his collaborators abandoned any hope of the return to a religious monopoly and truly believed that such a condition was stultifying to religion. Instead, it is beneficial to have many religions and many denominations, worship centers, etc. in a society. Their competition makes them try harder and offer better products (i.e. religious goods that people really want). On the other hand, when there is a single religion (often established and aided by the state) or when there is a regulated religious economy, religious firms get lazy, do not meet the needs of their customers, and generate lower levels of religiosity. People inevitably stop consuming, and the religion, denomination, or worship center goes out of business.

This Darwinian or Spencerian model of religion provides the mechanism by which religious species or populations (in the biological sense, of the local segment of a species) arise, change, and decline. We might add one more point about the environment in which contemporary religions must live, adapt, migrate, or die. No doubt, whether or not we subscribe to Stark's baldly economic view of things, religions (and their denominations and worship centers) must compete, not only with each other but with the mundane and profane facets of modern life, whether it be science, work, or Sunday football. Starting in the mid-twentieth century, this cultural environment became even more unconducive to institutional monopolies on religion. Beginning with radio and television transmissions of worship, and creating new religious celebrities like Bishop Fulton Sheen and Billy Graham and a new mode of televangelism, believers have been offered more (unconventional) ways to practice their faith. It is no surprise, then, that social media and the internet, with their tendencies toward do-it-yourself culture and interest/identity niches, have fostered deinstitutionalization and decongregationalization (i.e. allowing people to perform their religious duties apart from the dictates or confines of the institution).[15]

In fact, the deinstitutionalization of religion is just one part of a trend noted by sociologists and anthropologists toward a widespread retreat of institutions, from marriage to work.[16] Just as more people choose (or are forced into) "irregular employment" and "side hustles" to make a living, so too will more people choose irregular or side religion. Just as more people opt for living together outside of marriage (or living alone), so too will more people opt for believing together outside of denominations (or even believing alone). Indeed, under the conditions of postmodernism and neoliberalism, scholars have noted the collapse of "grand

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[14] Rodney Stark and Laurence R. Iannaccone, "A Supply-Side Reinterpretation of the 'Secularization' of Europe," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33, no. 3 (September 1994): 232, https://doi.org/10.2307/1386688.

[15] In the case of Islam, see Gary R. Bunt, *Hashtag Islam: How Cyber-Islamic Environments are Transforming Religious Authority* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

[16] In the case of marriage, see Andrew J. Cherlin, "The Deinstitutionalization of American Marriage," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66, no. 4 (2004): 848–61, http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-2445.2004.00058.x.

narratives,"[17] as well as the decay of big government and the classic Weberian state.[18] We should only expect the collapse and decay of big religion, but these conditions have not meant the end of narratives or government or religion. Foucault diagnosed the diffusion of "governmentality" into more corners of society, and we might equally predict the diffusion of religiosity or religio-mentality, which tends to replace big religion with smaller specialized ones. One powerful conclusion is that the era of denominational institutions which Howard predicts was only a phase in the story of Christianity, suited for some social milieus but unsuited for today's social reality. From movement Christianity came, and to movement it may return.

Finally, is institutional Christianity doomed to pass away with a bang or with a whimper? The truth is that the proliferation of denominations, sects, and worship centers at the expense of institutions is not *less* religion but *more* religion. When a religious edifice is shattered, its countless shards may live on and prosper. This is a lesson that should have been learned from the successful navigation of the Protestant "crisis" in the 1500s: Christianity has emerged not weaker for the Reformation but stronger for it. I have made the same point to my atheist friends, who have despaired about the loss of consensus through the multiplication of atheist/secularist organizations. "Don't worry," I assure them, "having two or three or a dozen national and international organizations is not a bad thing, and the presence of small local atheist meetings—just like house churches and prayer groups, exploited so brilliantly by megachurches—actually allow atheism to reach more people and to adapt to more identities and interests." Call it target marketing.

Still, current experience teaches us that institutional religion is not the only kind of religion; "religion" is not synonymous with "institution." The Soviet Union learned the hard way that active suppression of church institutions could not and did not extinguish religiosity. As Gregory Freeze describes it, the crucial error of the Communist Party was to assume that Christianity equaled church institutions; from the regime's perspective, undermining the Orthodox Church and its authorities amounted to undermining religion. However, by attacking the institutional church, the Soviets only decentralized and popularized religion, in the literal sense of leaving it in the hands of the ordinary people. Freeze claims that the government "inadvertently empowered…the zealous activists who, for decades under the ancient regime, had been demanding more authority for the parish community."[19] No longer contained by the priesthood, Christianity became vernacularized in a new and sometimes frightening way: "displays of piety spilled over into the public arena—most dramatically, in an epidemic of 'miracles' and 'icon renewals' that occurred outside parish churches and triggered spontaneous mass pilgrimages."[20] In the end, Soviet actions "weakened the Church but strengthened the church."[21] That is, they weakened the institution but strengthened the faithful.

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[17] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (1979; repr., Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

[18] Rogers Brubaker and David D. Laitin, "Ethnic and Nationalist Violence," *Annual Review of Sociology* 24, no. 1 (1998): 423–52, http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.24.1.423.

[19] Gregory L. Freeze, "Subversive Atheism: Soviet Antireligious Campaigns and the Religious Revival in Ukraine in the 1920s," in *State Secularism and Lived Religion in Soviet Russia and Ukraine,* ed. Catherine Wanner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 31.

[20] Ibid., 40.

[21] Ibid., 34.

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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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*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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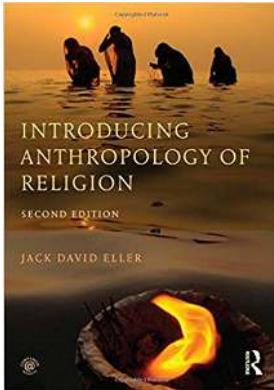
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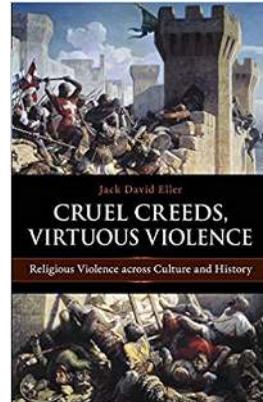
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