

## 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 Blicicism,” 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).

ever actually arrest church fragmentation, at least not in time to halt its de-institutionalization. Regardless, Branch's epistemological hypothesis makes sense as a dominant factor contributing to the religion singularity. Indeed, Howard devotes an entire chapter in his book, *Paradox*, to foundationalism, arguing it was Christianity's arrogant (foundationalist) belief that humans can eliminate subjectivity and accurately comprehend absolute truth that caused the church's current destabilization.<sup>8</sup>

While we agree with Branch's main thrust, we would argue that other elements of his essay appear to assume certain socio-historical beliefs about church ministry that are far too generalized. In his article, Branch briefly summarizes demographic data from selected surveys to demonstrate that so-called "conservative" churches have seen positive growth while so-called "liberal" (i.e. mainline) churches have declined. He suggests the two are related, which would seem to imply that Christians have been leaving mainline churches for conservative ones, though he is quick to clarify that both liberal and conservative churches are now in decline, resulting in a post-liberal and post-conservative trend in theology.<sup>9</sup> The problem is that it is difficult to extrapolate anything about this supposed liberal-conservative divide from these demographic surveys without a great deal of speculative assumptions. To begin, there is no question that in North America, from the 1960s until recently, mainline Protestant denominations have experienced a net numerical decline while conservative evangelical churches have experienced a steady net numerical increase.<sup>10</sup> However, it is not immediately apparent why this trend would be the case. According to one prominent theory, articulated here by Rodney Stark, "Americans mostly change churches in search of a deeper, more compelling faith," implying that stricter evangelical denominations are more spiritually vigorous than the ineffective traditions of mainline liberalism.<sup>11</sup> Not surprisingly, theorists have argued that conservative theologies are intricately linked to stricter ("high tension") churches, oftentimes being the underlying cause for other growth-related factors, including a congregation's sense of absolutism and missionary zeal. Accordingly, committed religionists tend to desire conservative theologies because, among other things, it promotes stricter adherence to the religion and provides a more satisfying, convictional, and self-assured message that abounds in feelings of epistemic security.<sup>12</sup>

There appears to be support for this speculation. A small group of researchers in Canada found that theological conservatism, oftentimes associated with greater moral strictness, was a

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<sup>8</sup> Ken Howard, *Paradox: Creating Christian Community Beyond Us and Them* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2010), 30–46.

<sup>9</sup> Branch, "Grenz and Franke's Post-Foundationalism," 5–7.

<sup>10</sup> For brief reviews of this trend in both Canada and the United States, see Kurt Bowen, *Christians in a Secular World: The Canadian Experience* (Montreal, Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), 276–79; Kevin N. Flatt, *After Evangelicalism: The Sixties and the United Church of Canada* (Montreal, Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013), 229–49; Rodney Stark, *What Americans Really Believe: New Findings from the Baylor Surveys of Religion* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 21–22; and Gregory Smith, *America's Changing Religious Landscape: Christians Decline Sharply as Share of Population; Unaffiliated and Other Faiths Continue to Grow* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015), 4, 8, accessed April 3, 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

<sup>11</sup> See Stark, *What Americans Really Believe*, 21–25, 29–36; quote appears on p. 21.

<sup>12</sup> For these correlations, see Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 141–68 and Jeremy N. Thomas and Daniel V. A. Olson, "Testing the Strictness Thesis and Competing Theories of Congregational Growth," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49, no. 4 (December 2010): 619–39, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2010.01534.x>.

significant element in predicting church growth, whereas theological liberalism was associated with churches in decline.<sup>13</sup> Roger Finke and Rodney Stark discovered the same thing when they found that even theologically conservative churches associated with mainline denominations grew while their liberal counterparts from the same denomination weakened.<sup>14</sup> In relation to Branch's epistemological survey, one study showed that congregants were attracted to certain churches specifically because the pastors expressed certainty about the absolute truthfulness of their preaching message.<sup>15</sup>

### *The liberal-conservative misconception*

Regrettably, these types of studies often engage in a causal oversimplification when they attempt to divide denominations into "liberal-versus-conservative" congregations, reducing everything to mere theology. Yet, national polling data suggests that theology is not as important as some theorists would like to believe. For example, of the 49% of American adults who actively looked for a new church in the last few years, the majority (34%) said they did so simply because they had moved. Among evangelicals and mainline Protestants, almost half (49% and 45% respectively) said they looked for a new church for the same reason. Interestingly, 11% said they looked for a new church because they disagreed with the clergy, 7% cited other problems with their old church, and 5% claimed they had a change in their beliefs. Only 3% cited problems with their old church's theology as the reason for looking elsewhere. Likewise, 3% said they were exploring new beliefs, 1% stated their beliefs had evolved, and 1% cited an actual change in their religion or denomination. There was no statistically significant mention of anything to do with theology, doctrines, or beliefs. In fact, of the 71% who said finding a new church was easy, only 5% said it was easy because they agreed with the church's theology, the rest cited elements relating to convenience and a sense of community as the reason why they chose their new church. Correspondingly, of the 49% of Americans who searched for a different church, only 7% cited their disagreement with theology as the reason why it was difficult to find a new congregation. The majority of those who found it difficult again cited problems relating to convenience and a sense of community, not theology.<sup>16</sup> In other words, the reasons why people leave their church or join a new one almost never have anything to do with theology or doctrine. They have to do with more practical concerns of a social nature.

There is no clearer indication that theology has little to do with church growth than the actual principles, practices, and priorities of Christians themselves. As George Barna remarked

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<sup>13</sup> It is important to note that the researchers compared churches within the same mainline Protestant denominations in the same geographical area (southern Ontario). Some of the congregations exhibited more conservative beliefs while other churches exhibited more liberal beliefs, though they were part of the same mainline denomination. See David Millard Haskell, Kevin N. Flatt, and Stephanie Burgoyne, "Theology Matters: Comparing the Traits of Growing and Declining Mainline Protestant Church Attendees and Clergy," *Review of Religious Research* 58, no. 4 (2016): 515–41, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s13644-016-0255-4>.

<sup>14</sup> Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 276–79.

<sup>15</sup> Joseph B. Tamney and Stephen D. Johnson, "The Popularity of Strict Churches," *Review of Religious Research* 39, no. 3 (March 1998): 209–23, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3512589>.

<sup>16</sup> Alan Cooperman, *Choosing a New Church or House of Worship: Americans Look for Good Sermons, Warm Welcome* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, Aug. 23, 2016), 5, 11–13, 21–23, accessed April 3, 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/2016/08/23/choosing-a-new-church-or-house-of-worship/>. Of the 49% who searched for a new church, 28% said it was difficult, of which 26% said it was difficult due to concerns over theology. Hence, only 7.29% of the original 49% cited anything to do with theology.

back in 2001, “Three of every five adult Christians we surveyed told us they want to have a deep commitment to the Christian faith, but they are not involved in any intentional effort to grow spiritually.”<sup>17</sup> This lack of intentionality for a richer faith or greater spiritual commitment conflicts with the idea that Christians deliberately change churches for the purpose of joining a more theologically conservative denomination. Similarly, yearning for a stricter spiritual life appears inconsistent with the low number of Christians who actually take measurable steps to increase their spiritual development. At the turn of the century, only 24% of Christians participated in some form of Sunday school, 15% had a spiritual mentor, 11% attended classes designed to enhance spiritual maturity, and 30% of Christians confessed to having no plan or process in place to achieve any spiritual goals. Ultimately, less than 18% of Christians stated that growing spiritually was their biggest ambition in life.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, Diana Butler-Bass argues against the blanket assumption that conservative churches invariably grow while liberal churches invariably decline. From qualitative research, she has demonstrated that liberal churches with a clear sense of purpose actually tend to grow.<sup>19</sup> If theology or a deeper faith were truly the cause for liberal decline, surely more Christians would prioritize these very objectives in their own spiritual lives.

Moreover, the idea that evangelicalism grows because there is a mass exodus of disillusioned liberals is simply an over exaggeration of the actual data. According to Mark Chavez, the surge of liberal Protestants switching to conservative churches started to decelerate precisely when conservative churches began to grow. Barely 10% of mainline Christians born after 1970 switch to conservatism.<sup>20</sup> As indicated from a 2007 poll, the majority of those raised conservative merely switch to another conservative tradition. Liberal Christians, on the other hand, were more evenly split where approximately the same number of those raised in a mainline tradition retained their liberal affiliation as those who switched to a conservative tradition. In fact, the relocation rates between liberal and conservative denominations were almost identical where 31% of evangelicals had converted from a non-conservative denomination and 30% of mainline Christians had converted from a non-liberal tradition.<sup>21</sup> Currently, only 14% of those now professing to be evangelical say they were once raised liberal whereas 20% of current liberals say they were once raised conservative, indicating a potential shift in how American Christians associate with evangelicalism.<sup>22</sup> The data from these national polls depict a different understanding of denominational switching than the presumed belief about conservative dominance: liberal Christians are not deconverting to evangelical churches any more than conservative Christians are converting to mainline denominations. Attempts to switch

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<sup>17</sup> George Barna, *Growing True Disciples: New Strategies for Producing Genuine Followers of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2001), 34–35.

<sup>18</sup> Barna, *Growing True Disciples*, 35–42.

<sup>19</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004), 3–6.

<sup>20</sup> Mark Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 87–88, <https://doi.org/10.23943/princeton/9780691146850.001.0001>.

<sup>21</sup> Luis Lugo, *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Religious Affiliation; Diverse and Dynamic* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, Feb. 2008) 28, 31–32, accessed April 3, 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/2008/02/01/u-s-religious-landscape-survey-religious-affiliation/>.

<sup>22</sup> See the demographics in Smith, *America’s Changing Religious Landscape* 33–44.

denominations on either side are infrequent and are equally divided between those who switch traditions and those who retain the same denominational affiliation.

The point is that theology really has little to do with church growth and decline. Thus, when taking data samples from the top mainline denominations in the United States, one survey found that a congregation's beliefs did not substantially influence their numerical growth when other growth-related factors were considered, such as being externally focused (e.g. proselyting outsiders and engaging in social action), having superior programming, and providing a climate that fosters personal self-reflection. Because these factors are equally possible in both conservative and liberal assemblies, both types of churches are just as likely to grow numerically regardless of their doctrinal stances.<sup>23</sup> Hence, many theologically conservative churches decline as they experience the same reduction in membership and attendance rates as mainline denominations.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, some liberal churches continue to thrive congregationally, which indicates that there are other factors influencing growth rates apart from a mere conservative-liberal divide.<sup>25</sup>

The truth is that the decline of liberal mainline Protestantism was an historical phenomenon much like it was for liberalism's incredible growth during the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>26</sup> Its historical demise is most likely the result of a religious reaction against progressive societal changes, coupled with the fact that conservatives have had higher birth rates and membership retention than their liberal counterparts.<sup>27</sup> The point is that correlation does not equate to causation, and oversimplified explanations rarely enjoy universal application. There is simply no real evidence to suggest that conservative beliefs actually cause numerical growth or congregational vitality. The situation is simply far more complex and is, therefore, not a useful paradigm with which to understand the causal factors surrounding the religion singularity.

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Daniel V. A. Olson, "Congregational Growth and Decline in Indiana Among Five Mainline Denominations," in *Church and Denominational Growth*, ed. David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 208–24 and Michael J. Donahue and Peter L. Benson, "Belief Style, Congregational Climate, and Program Quality," in *Church and Denominational Growth*, ed. David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 225–40.

<sup>24</sup> C. Kirk Hadaway and Penny Long Marler, "Growth and Decline in the Mainline," in *Faith in America: Changes, Challenges, New Directions*, ed. Charles H. Lippy, vol. 1, *Organized Religion Today* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006), 1–24; Chaves, *American Religion*, 92, 131n9; Howard, "The Religion Singularity," 78, 89.

<sup>25</sup> See Kevin D. Dougherty, Brandon C. Martinez, and Gerardo Martí "Congregational Diversity and Attendance in a Mainline Protestant Denomination," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 54, no. 4 (December 2015): 668–83, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12229> and Jennifer March, "Reconsidering Mainline Decline: Contemporary Forms of Mainline Adaptation and Congregational Survival" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Montreal, Quebec, 2006), 1–20.

<sup>26</sup> Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 763–84 and Hadaway and Marler, "Growth and Decline in the Mainline," 1–24.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Penny Long Marler and C. Kirk Hadaway, "New Church Development and Denominational Growth (1950–1988): Symptom or Cause?," in *Church and Denominational Growth*, ed. David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 47–86; Bruce A. Greer, "Strategies for Evangelism and Growth in Three Denominations (1965–1990)," in *Church and Denominational Growth*, ed. David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 87–111; and Norman M. Green and Paul W. Light, "Growth and Decline in an Inclusive Denomination: The ABC Experience," in *Church and Denominational Growth*, ed. David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 112–26.

## Social Memory: A Response to John Lingelbach

Next, we consider John Lingelbach's essay, "First Century Christian Diversity: Historical Evidence of a Social Phenomenon."<sup>28</sup> Here, Lingelbach compares the religion singularity to the diversity of the primitive church, focusing particularly on the years 30 to 100 CE. In this article, he conceives of the earliest form of Christian religion (the "pre-Pauline oral tradition") as having been thoroughly Jewish. Without explicitly stating it, the historical assumption appears to be that Jesus (a Second Temple Jew) passed along teachings directly to his apostles (also Jews), which were then disseminated across Palestine in oral form. By the middle of the first century, however, this primitive Christian movement broke into two dominant and influential sects, the Pauline church and the Ebionite church (the former predating the latter).<sup>29</sup> Subsequently, Lingelbach argues that not only did Pauline Christianity break from the apostles' original Jewish teachings (centered in Jerusalem) but that Ebionite Christianity broke away (in part) because of Paul's seeming rejection of Judaism.<sup>30</sup>

Howard, on the other hand, argues in *Paradoxy* that Paul viewed the original Jesus tradition as an a-religious movement, meaning it was indifferent and possibly even critical of "religion" to the point that Paul did not believe people needed to change their religion to follow Christ.<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, Lingelbach concludes that "original" Christianity, which was initially persecuted by Paul, had quickly splintered into two main factions (one Jewish, the other Gentile) by the end of the first century.<sup>32</sup> The relationship of his article to the religion singularity is its

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<sup>28</sup> John F. Lingelbach, "First Century Christian Diversity: Historical Evidence of a Social Phenomenon," *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 11–20, <https://doi.org/10.33929/sherm.2019.vol1.no1.02>.

<sup>29</sup> The implication is most noticeable in Lingelbach's treatment of the "Nazarenes" as distinct from the Judaizing Ebionites (Lingelbach, "First Century Christian Diversity," 14, 17–18), as well as his suggestion that the Nazarenes may have predated the Apostle Paul's conversion, despite Epiphanius of Salamis (ca. 315–403) claiming that the Nazarene "heresy" first developed in the Decapolis toward the end of the first century (*Pan.* 29.7.7–8). This is also Howard's contention when he argues elsewhere that the Nazarene sect was likely the earliest expression of Christianity and, surprisingly, the longest lasting since it may have existed as late as the sixth century (Kenneth W. Howard, *Excommunicating the Faithful: Jewish Christianity in the Early Church*, 3rd ed. [Germantown, MD: FaithX Press, 2013], 22–27, 33–35). For more details on the Nazarene sect, see Martinus C. de Boer, "The Nazoreans: Living at the Boundary of Judaism and Christianity," in *Tolerance and Intolerance in Early Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Graham N. Stanton and Guy G. Stroumsa (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 239–62, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511659645.015>; Craig R. Koester, "The Origin and Significance of the Flight to Pella Tradition," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (January 1989): 90–106; P. H. R. van Houwelingen, "Fleeing Forward: The Departure of Christians from Jerusalem to Pella," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 65, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 181–200; and Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 1–33, <https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812203844>.

<sup>30</sup> This is an interesting suggestion considering that many scholars date the Ebionite movement to the second century as an offshoot of the Nazorean movement (see S. C. Mimouni, "Les nazoréens: Recherche étymologique et historique," *Revue Biblique* 105, no. 2 [1998]: 208–62). However, Lingelbach's theory does have affinities to Andries van Aarde's research on cultural identity in Ebionism (Andries G. van Aarde, "Ebionite Tendencies in the Jesus Tradition: The Infancy Gospel of Thomas Interpreted from the Perspective of Ethnic Identity," *Neotestamentica* 40, no. 2 [2006]: 353–82). Cf. Joan E. Taylor, "The Phenomenon of Early Jewish-Christianity: Reality or Scholarly Invention?," *Vigiliae Christianae* 44, no. 4 (1990): 313–34, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/157007290x00090>.

<sup>31</sup> Howard, *Paradoxy*, 47–65.

<sup>32</sup> Lingelbach, "First Century Christian Diversity," 15–19.

reiteration of Howard's assertion that theological diversity has been part of Christian tradition since its earliest days.<sup>33</sup>

Unfortunately, Lingelbach does not trace Christian diversity far back enough, hinting that the Christian church was quite homogenous (at least in fundamental beliefs, such as Christ's divinity) prior to splintering into Pauline and Ebionite forms. As such, Lingelbach appears to take the traditionally catholic and canonical viewpoint that there existed a type of "mother-church," led by the apostolic Twelve, whose base of operation was in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 2:41–42). From this geographic center came the apostolic faith of Christianity *par excellence*, though variations and elaborations eventually appeared over time. The implication is that there was an "original" or "pure" form of Christianity prior to these evolutionary and theological developments (Cf. Clement, *1 Clem.* 42.1–4; Tertullian, *Marc.* 4.7).<sup>34</sup> The problem is that this historical reconstruction, however nuanced, does not account for the nature of ancient oral traditions and their dissemination through social and collective memory.

Advances in the social sciences have demonstrated, particularly in the fields of historical Jesus research, that there likely never was an "original" form of Christianity, even from the apostles themselves. This conclusion becomes especially evident when considering the itinerant and contextual nature of Jesus' ministry and the subsequent multiplicity of interpretations about Jesus' person and message (even while Jesus was still alive; cf. Mark 8:27–29 and par.). The Christologies that existed prior to Jesus' crucifixion undoubtedly persisted afterwards, evidenced most pointedly by the fact that every instance of verbal communication is both unique and transitory to the specific biosphere of Jesus' nomadic oral performances.<sup>35</sup> As Elaine Pagels remarks, "We can see how both gnostic and orthodox forms of Christianity could emerge as variant interpretations of the teaching and significance of Christ."<sup>36</sup> Even Paul acknowledged multiple christological interpretations that conflicted with his own (cf. Gal 1.6–7; 2 Cor. 11:4; cf. 1 John 4:1). The point is that equiprimordiality, not singular originality, better characterizes the earliest pre-Pauline Jesus movement, meaning that oral cultures did not lend themselves to a single, "original" tradition like it would have in a print-dominant culture.<sup>37</sup> It is unlikely that there was a fixed or stable Jesus tradition prior to the written Gospels despite the apologetic determination of people like Birger Gerhardsson or Kenneth Bailey.<sup>38</sup>

This multiformity indicates that there existed many pre-Pauline Christianities and that neither Pauline nor Ebionite tradition popularized Christian diversity in the primitive church,

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<sup>33</sup> Howard, "The Religion Singularity," 87, 90. See also, James M. Robinson and Helmut Koester, *Trajectories through Early Christianity* (1971; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006).

<sup>34</sup> Lingelbach remarks, "Paul probably received an introduction to this initial version of Christianity from Peter and James three years after his conversion" (Lingelbach, "First Century Christian Diversity," 13). He later concludes, "The initial movement of Christianity was the movement persecuted by Paul" (p. 19).

<sup>35</sup> Alan Kirk, "Manuscript Tradition as A *Tertium Quid*: Orality and Memory in Scribal Practices," in *Memory and the Jesus Tradition: The Reception of Jesus in the First Three Centuries* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), 114–37, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9780567663474.0014>; Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2012), 115–33, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780203103258>; Ruth H. Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality: Studies in the Technology of Communication* (Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 69.

<sup>36</sup> Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, Pbk. ed. (1979; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 148.

<sup>37</sup> See esp., Werner H. Kelber, "In the Beginning Were the Words: The Apotheosis and Narrative Displacement of the Logos," in *Imprints, Voiceprints, and Footprints of Memory: Collected Essays of Werner h. Kelber*, Resources for Biblical Study (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2013), 77–80, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt5hjh34.10> and Rafael Rodríguez, *Oral Tradition and the New Testament: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781472550675>.

<sup>38</sup> See Eric Eve, *Behind the Gospels: Understanding the Oral Tradition* (2013; repr., Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 33–46, 66–85.



though Lingelbach is correct to emphasize that these two movements were likely the most influential of the earliest breakaway movements. Considering that both the oral traditions and the variant written Gospels were meant for audial performances, variations and discrepancies in these stories would have been considered an appropriate use of artistic license.<sup>39</sup> In fact, ancient scribal practices reveal that texts were copied *from* oral performances *for* oral performances, which meant that changes to the Jesus tradition would have been expected and accepted in an oral-dominant culture.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, the nature of social memory in oral cultures actually heightens the premise that diversity was both inherent to and prolific in the primitive first century church long before Paul's Gentile breakaway.<sup>41</sup>

In terms of social and collective memory, the pre-Pauline and pre-textual traditions were largely a social phenomenon where the mere act of remembering was derived from and dependent upon pre-existing cultural structures. The implication is, once again, a reminder that *all* approaches to Christian faith, especially in the first century, are *interpretations* of people's localized and socially-constructed memory of personal experiences.<sup>42</sup> Most interesting for historical research is the suggestion that the Jesus traditions may have undergone rapid change immediately after Jesus' death as his followers interpreted their collective memories according to their post-Easter needs, which only then stabilized into a more fixed tradition later in the first century.<sup>43</sup> The point is that Lingelbach approaches church history from the standpoint of a *textual* perspective rather than from the more appropriate *oral* mindset of the primitive church, which would add even greater depth to his understanding of first-century Christian diversity.

Finally, Lingelbach concludes that the cosmopolitan sub-continent of Asia Minor may have served as a geographic nucleus for diverse belief systems, which is both captivating and historically plausible. Regrettably, this proposal is only briefly mentioned in Lingelbach's article and supported simply from the fact that different Christianities took root alongside each other in Asia Minor. Nonetheless, the idea that this region may have strengthened diversity, as seen in modern-day metropolises, is an exciting approach to studying the religion singularity. Further sociological research ought to be done on whether the cosmopolitan nature of Asia Minor would

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. John Miles Foley, "Memory in Oral Tradition," in *Performing the Gospel: Orality, Memory, and Mark; Essays Dedicated to Werner Kelber*, Pbk. ed., ed. Richard A. Horsley, Jonathan A. Draper, and John Miles Foley (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 83–96; Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 2nd ed., ed. Stephen Mitchell and Gregory Nagy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 99–125, 133; and Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality*, 69.

<sup>40</sup> A. N. Doane, "The Ethnography of Scribal Writing and Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Scribe as Performer," *Oral Tradition* 9, no. 2 (October 1994): 420–39; Raymond F. Person Jr., "The Ancient Israelite Scribe as Performer," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 601–9, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3266629>; Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, *Visible Song: Transitional Literacy in Old English Verse* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>41</sup> Kirk, "Manuscript Tradition as A *Tertium Quid*," 114–37.

<sup>42</sup> See Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Sandra Huebenthal, "Social and Cultural Memory in Biblical Exegesis: The Quest for an Adequate Application," in *Cultural Memory in Biblical Exegesis*, ed. Pernille Carstens, Trine Hasselbalch, and Niels Peter Lemche, *Perspectives on Hebrew Scriptures and Its Contexts* 17 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2012), 175–99; and Alan Kirk, "Social and Cultural Memory," in *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Use of the Past in Early Christianity*, ed. Alan Kirk and Tom Thatcher, *Semeia Studies* 52 (Boston, MA: SBL, 2005), 1–24.

<sup>43</sup> See Darren M. Slade, "Miracle Eyewitness Reports," in *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion*, ed. David A. Leeming (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer, 2018), [http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-27771-9\\_200227-1](http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-27771-9_200227-1) and the research in Eve, *Behind the Gospels*, 66–85.

have intensified Christian diversity (or if diversity was already at a sufficiently high level before reaching Asia Minor) just like, according to Lingelbach, the internet has done today.<sup>44</sup>

### Religious Politics: A Response to Kevin Seybold

Kevin Seybold's position paper, "A Cultural Cognition Perspective on Religion Singularity: How Political Identity Influences Religious Affiliation," challenges conventional wisdom surrounding the relationship between religion and politics. As demographic surveys consistently show, many Christians, most notably white evangelicals, unquestioningly identify with the Republican Party. In fact, one 2008 study found that white evangelicals are more likely to claim Republican politicians are not conservative *enough* for their liking.<sup>45</sup> Demographics demonstrate that evangelicalism is now an ethnically regionalized culture-religion confined almost exclusively to lower income small towns in America's Southern and Midwest areas. As a narrow subculture within white America, these evangelicals have little in common with younger generations who are typically more diverse, more tolerant of alternative lifestyles, live in urban population centers, are politically moderate or liberal, college educated, and non-married.<sup>46</sup> What this potentially means for the study of religion and politics is that white evangelicalism might lessen in terms of being a reliable voting bloc, though their political influence remains steadfast for now.<sup>47</sup> Until then, the Republican Party can effectively rely on the white evangelical vote by employing alarmist rhetoric on a handful of emotionally-charged issues, which intend to galvanize, polarize, and distract religious voters.<sup>48</sup>

With this in mind, it has generally been assumed that most evangelicals vote Republican because they are Christian, but Seybold's article challenges this widely held assumption. Instead, he forces psychologists and sociologists to ask the opposite question: What if these voters identify as Republican first and, *because* of their political affiliation, subsequently consider themselves Christian? Utilizing cultural cognition theory, Seybold uses both psychological and sociological studies to expose the role of group identity in judgment formation. His conclusion is stimulating: the extreme polarization in American politics today

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<sup>44</sup> Cf. Paul Trebilco, "Christian Communities in Western Asia Minor into the Early Second Century: Ignatius and Others as Witnesses Against Bauer," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 49, no. 1 (March 2006): 17–44 and Mikael Tellbe, "De Efesoskristna : Teologisk mångfald och social identitet i den tidiga kristna rörelsen," *Svensk Teologisk Kvartralskrift* 86, no. 1 (2010): 4–12.

<sup>45</sup> Andrew Kohut et al., *Some Social Conservative Disillusionment: More Americans Question Religion's Role in Politics* (Results from the 2008 Annual Religion and Public Life Survey) (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, August 21, 2008), 16–18, accessed April 6, 2019, <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/legacy-pdf/445.pdf>.

<sup>46</sup> Glenn H. Utter and John W. Storey, *The Religious Right: A Reference Handbook*, 3rd ed. (Millerton, NY: Grey House Publishing, 2007), 145–56; Smith, *America's Changing Religious Landscape*, 49–50, 68–77. See also the summary in Ronald J. Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 27–28.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2016), 110.

<sup>48</sup> See for example, Jason C. Bivins, *Religion of Fear: The Politics of Horror in Conservative Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) and David Domke and Kevin Coe, *The God Strategy: How Religion Became a Political Weapon in America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195326413.001.0001>.

may be what is contributing to the destabilization of institutional Christianity.<sup>49</sup> In other words, what may be turning people away from Christ or institutional religion in general is Christianity's (particularly evangelicalism's) unquestioning support of one party's political agenda, even if that agenda openly conflicts with the religion's ethical guidelines. It may even be the case that a growing antagonism toward Republicans (outside of the Midwest and South, of course) may result in an equal disdain for Christianity, as well.<sup>50</sup> As Robert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, once said about the 2016 Presidential election, "Long term, I'm afraid people are going to remember evangelicals in this election for supporting the unsupportable and defending the absolutely indefensible."<sup>51</sup>

Seybold's article also has significant implications for understanding evangelicalism's continued support for President Donald Trump despite repeatedly violating traditional Christian ethics by him and his administration. From a cultural cognition perspective, these evangelicals appear to be Republican *first* and Christians second because their identity revolves around societal dominance (not Jesus Christ).<sup>52</sup> Hence, eight out of ten Christian believers cite non-religious and non-spiritual goals, such as family happiness, financial security, and successful careers, as the single most important thing they would like to accomplish in life. Of those who listed some type of spiritual growth as a high priority (20%), half cited mundane objectives, such as maintaining faith in God or knowing they are "saved." When asked to identify personal spiritual goals, the majority of Christians (60%) were unable to do so. Of the 40% who identified a spiritual ambition, only 20% of believers could provide a specific goal they would like to achieve, whereas the other 20% simply offered vague concepts and ideas, such as "to become a better Christian" or "to grow spiritually." Very few of the respondents were able or willing to offer more than one spiritual goal, and less than one in five Christians were able to define "spiritual success" beyond a solitary component of personal maturation.<sup>53</sup>

The point is that from Seybold's article, there are good reasons to believe many so-called "evangelicals" are simply self-identified Republicans who claim the title "Christian" because that is the expectation for membership in their socio-political cohort. In reality, however, these groups appear to be only quasi-evangelical,<sup>54</sup> constituting the disaffected portions of white society who feel they must rebel against a system and culture that is progressively eroding their former societal privilege.<sup>55</sup> If this is indeed the case, the "whitelash" occurring in evangelicalism is likely to continue destabilizing institutional Christianity into the foreseeable future.

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<sup>49</sup> Kevin S. Seybold, "A Cultural Cognition Perspective on Religion Singularity: How Political Identity Influences Religious Affiliation," *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 21–28, <https://doi.org/10.33929/sherm.2019.vol1.no1.03>.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Gregory A. Boyd, *The Myth of a Christian Nation: How the Quest for Political Power Is Destroying the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005).

<sup>51</sup> R. Albert Mohler Jr., "Mohler, Jr. Discusses Evangelical Support for Trump" (YouTube video), October 11, 2016, 00:29–01:21, accessed April 6, 2019, [youtube.com/watch?v=s6hsLy0dimA&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6hsLy0dimA&feature=youtu.be).

<sup>52</sup> See for example, Marvin A. McMickle, "Where Have All the Prophets Gone?," *Ashland Theological Journal* 37 (2005): 13–15.

<sup>53</sup> Barna, *Growing True Disciples*, 35–42.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Stephen J. Nichols, *Jesus Made in America: A Cultural History from the Puritans to The Passion of the Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 198–221.

<sup>55</sup> R. R. Reno, "Trumping Evangelicals," *First Things* 262 (April 2016): 3–4.

Scientific Reductionism: A Response to Jack David Eller

In Jack David Eller's response to the religion singularity, "Is the Disintegration of Christianity a Problem—or Even a Surprise?," he argues for methodological naturalism when tracing the current destabilization of institutional Christianity, rejecting what he perceives to be the metaphysical value judgments of Howard's original article. In other words, Eller emphasizes the need for remaining detached from what he believes is the natural evolutionary development of all religions: birth, growth, adaptation, procreation, and death (just like any other biological organism). In the case of the religion singularity, however, death involves the institutional nature of Christianity as opposed to the religion itself, which Eller argues is likely to flourish despite Christianity's rapid fragmentation. Using Rodney Stark's notion of a "religious economy" (with some reservation), the breakup of churches and denominations simply means more varieties for religious consumers to choose from. As an anthropologist, Eller views the demise of Christianity as only one phase in a long history of denominational speciation, hybridization, and extinction.<sup>56</sup>

Eller's assessment of the religion singularity implicitly differentiates between the positive sciences and metaphysics when he suggests Howard is experiencing "angst" and "distress" at Christianity's destabilization. Of course, Eller does misread Howard's tone when he presumes he "bemoans" the dramatic paradigm shift presently occurring in Christianity. On the contrary, Howard is quite hopeful that these changes, though they may cause the demise of Christianity's traditional institutional structure, will ultimately help Christians recapture the essence of faith apart from institutional and dogmatic control.<sup>57</sup> In any case, we agree with Eller that the scientific study of religion should rely on empirical data and independent evaluations without an ideological allegiance. We believe that Eller is also correct to suggest that there exist no independent criteria with which to corroborate the accuracy of metaphysical speculations, particularly in relation to the abstract realm of spirituality.<sup>58</sup> Hence, he seeks to reorient the "religion singularity" discussion toward an evolutionary interpretation of the data. Anthropologically, the disintegration of institutional Christianity is no surprise since this has been the evolutionary development of most major religions throughout human history. As Eller succinctly describes it, "There is nothing new happening here."<sup>59</sup>

While Eller is undoubtedly correct in his implied demarcation between science and metaphysics (and he is certainly correct that Christianity, like most other major religions, has always been diverse),<sup>60</sup> there is still the danger of presenting an overly reductionistic explanation for the religion singularity. As Eller writes, "Religions ... are not eternal stable entities but are mobile, constructed, and *evolving* things like any natural species."<sup>61</sup> It is true that the democratization of Christianity has contributed to the loss of control by religious authorities, but

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<sup>56</sup> Jack David Eller, "Is the Disintegration of Christianity a Problem—or Even a Surprise?," *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 29–38, <https://doi.org/10.33929/sherm.2019.vol1.no1.04>.

<sup>57</sup> See for example, Howard, *Paradoxy*, esp. 138–76.

<sup>58</sup> See James A. Van Slyke, *The Cognitive Science of Religion*, Ashgate Science and Religion (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), 25, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315614809>.

<sup>59</sup> Eller, "Is the Disintegration of Christianity a Problem," 30.

<sup>60</sup> See for example, Martin Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul: Studies in the Earliest History of Christianity*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1983); Pieter J. Lalleman, "Polymorphy of Christ," in *The Apocryphal Acts of John*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer, Studies on the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1995), 1:97–118; and Jacob Parappally, "One Jesus – Many Christologies," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 61, no. 10 (1997): 708–18.

<sup>61</sup> Eller, "Is the Disintegration of Christianity a Problem," 32; italics in original.

his belief that the religion singularity is simply another by-product of religious evolution is not causally sufficient to explain the phenomenon in its entirety. The difference here is that the religion singularity is unlike anything observed in *any* religious tradition throughout human history, particularly since there has never been anything like the global reach and influence that institutional Christianity has enjoyed for centuries.<sup>62</sup> Presumably, Eller agrees with this assertion when he acknowledges, “Christianity yearned for, and temporarily appeared to achieve, centralization on a scale that no other religion has accomplished.”<sup>63</sup> Hence, the singularity phenomenon is unique precisely because Christianity quickly became global and then, even more rapidly, disintegrated into smaller and smaller fragments, though Howard does not believe congregations will shrink into numerous “church[es]-of-one,” as Eller argues.<sup>64</sup> Rather, Howard argues that the religion singularity is best defined as the irreversible collapse of *institutional* forms of Christian faith expression, thereby making typical denominational structures and worship centers unsustainable. Because of this collapse, a transformation in how Christians will “be church” and “do church” is inevitable. Thus, the religion singularity is not so much a prediction of things to come but an observation of an era coming to its inevitable end.

Basic anthropological and cultural evolution are certainly dominant factors contributing to Christianity’s destabilization, but this does not make the religion singularity universally applicable to all religions. This is especially true considering that most religions throughout history have been geographically isolated and tribally confined to certain people groups (ethnically, culturally, etc.), with or without institutional centralization.<sup>65</sup> Consequently, the splintering effect found in other religions, such as Judaism and Islam, where division occurs sporadically within a parent tradition (e.g. Reformed vs. Orthodox Judaism; Sunni vs. Shi’a Islam), is not the same phenomenon being described by the religion singularity. Here, Eller falls victim to his own ambiguity when he appears to equate the religion *singularity* with religious *diversity*. The two are not the same. With the latter, each religion has had its share of divergent traditions and dogmas that create fairly minor fragmentations within the religion, but the religious paradigm itself stays intact.<sup>66</sup> Yet, the religion singularity specifically describes such an extreme acceleration of religious division to the point that the entire religion begins to destabilize, ultimately risking total disintegration as a result. To make this distinction even clearer, compare the small handful of Jewish “denominations” that exist in the world today with the estimated 45,000 Christian denominations in 2014.<sup>67</sup> The difference is staggering in terms of sheer numbers, which should prevent any mistaken notion that the religion singularity is also occurring in other religions.

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<sup>62</sup> See Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World’s Largest Religion* (New York: HarperOne, 2011) and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Triumph of Christianity: How a Forbidden Religion Swept the World* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018).

<sup>63</sup> Eller, “Is the Disintegration of Christianity a Problem,” 32.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Eller, “Is the Disintegration of Christianity a Problem,” 31 and Howard, “The Religion Singularity,” 81–86.

<sup>65</sup> E. Geoffrey Parrinder, “Religion: Nature and Origins,” in *Companion Encyclopedia of Geography: The Environment and Humankind*, ed. Ian Douglas, Richard Huggett, and Mike Robinson (New York: Routledge, 1996), 120–36, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780203416822>.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Charles B. Jones, “The Necessity of Religious Diversity,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 28, no. 4 (1999): 403–17, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/000842989902800401>.

<sup>67</sup> Howard, “The Religion Singularity,” 82.

Furthermore, natural evolutionary development in culture and society may not be causally sufficient to describe the current religion singularity precisely because religious belief is not always a by-product of incremental or social adaptations.<sup>68</sup> In this case, Christianity's fragmentation is actually outpacing cultural and societal evolution. Eller's position appears to be that given enough time, other religions (e.g. Islam) will experience the same speciation, hybridization, and fragmentation as Christianity today. The problem with this reductionistic approach is that institutional Christianity's singularity collapse will undoubtedly impact the spread of other religions and may even initiate inter-cultural revolutions within other traditions *before* they have a chance to reach the same divisive acceleration as Christianity. Likewise, Christianity's rapid global spread occurred in sync with Western colonialism and at a time when non-belief was still socially abhorrent. Non-belief (e.g. atheism, agnosticism, etc.) is becoming more socially acceptable, which will potentially affect other faiths, such as the spread of Islam in non-Muslim countries. Thus, other religions will likely never benefit from colonialism or the near-total acceptance of religion and, therefore, may never reach the same acceleratory phase as Christianity did in the twentieth century. In other words, the kind of evolution happening to institutional Christianity has probably never happened before and may, in fact, never happen again. What social scientists are witnessing is a type of biological *emergence* in which mere evolution is an insufficient explanation.<sup>69</sup>

Ultimately, Eller's contention that "all things evolve, and all things pass" is not causally sufficient to explain the religion singularity.<sup>70</sup> Church growth and decline is simply much more complex than being the by-product of speciation, hybridization, and extinction, particularly when considering factors such as birth rates, youth retention, ministry innovation, types of external operations, institutional allegiances within society, and conflict management.<sup>71</sup> Rather than simply declare that because religion is man-made it must be susceptible to evolutionary change, the religion singularity suggests that institutional Christianity is not as linear in its development as might be expected. Rather than eliminate evolutionary explanations altogether, however, the singularity phenomenon acts as a corrective to overly reductionistic viewpoints about religious growth and change.

Of course, Dr. Eller is absolutely correct that religion, like any other organism, is in a constant state of dynamic flux. Speciation, hybridization, and extinction are just as much a part of religion as they are for the animal kingdom. What is especially interesting is the notion that institutional Christianity has seen both gradual adaptation throughout church history, changing its identity incrementally over time, as well as some forms of punctuated equilibrium where sudden mutations have resulted in dramatic alterations.<sup>72</sup> In every case, there is a process of

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<sup>68</sup> See Alicia Juarrero, *Dynamics in Action: Intentional Behavior as a Complex System* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999), 75–128, <http://dx.doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/2528.001.0001>.

<sup>69</sup> Although, this is not to affirm, as Eller rightly implies, a metaphysical or theological explanation, either, *contra* for example, Max Scheler, *Man's Place in Nature*, trans. Hans Meyerhoff (Boston: Noonday Press, 1961).

<sup>70</sup> Eller, "Is the Disintegration of Christianity a Problem," 36.

<sup>71</sup> See the confluence of numerous sociological factors revealed in Michael Hout, Andrew Greeley, and Melissa J. Wilde, "The Demographic Imperative in Religious Change in the United States," *American Journal of Sociology* 107, no. 2 (September 2001): 468–500, <https://doi.org/10.1086/324189>; Haskell, Flatt, and Burgoyne, "Theology Matters," 516–17; Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*, 235–83; and Tamney and Johnson, "The Popularity of Strict Churches," 209–23; Marler and Hadaway, "New Church Development," 47–86; Greer, "Strategies for Evangelism and Growth," 87–111; and Green and Light, "Growth and Decline in an Inclusive Denomination," 112–26.

<sup>72</sup> The sudden appearance and spread of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints ("Mormons") is an example of this punctuated equilibrium in religion.

cross-pollination between religious institutions and the surrounding culture, including other religious institutions and philosophies.<sup>73</sup>

In this sense, Eller is right that nothing new is happening. Christianity was itself a fragmentation from Second Temple (apocalyptic) Judaism and has continued to fragment internally for twenty centuries. The difference, once again, is that Christianity's current religion singularity is more akin to the plant pathogen, hammerhead viroids, than it is to Mammalia. In fact, the religion singularity more aptly correlates to a virus or bacterium, which mutates and evolves at incredible speeds; and like other viruses and bacteria, the rate of mutation is so self-destructively prolific that it has the potential to kill both the virus and the host body.<sup>74</sup> What Eller fails to acknowledge is that this self-destructiveness is not just cultural evolution over time; it is an out of control acceleration of mutations within institutional Christianity.

### Moral Failure: A Response to Brian McLaren

According to much sociological research, nonbelievers see Christians as rationalizing their own sense of superiority, which Christians feel gives them permission to behave in an unempathetic and uncompassionate way toward others. While pronouncing a moral judgment on others, Christians (for many) have developed an attitude of judgmentalism where they actually gain satisfaction in pointing out other people's failures.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, the vast majority of younger generations (87%) view Christians today as self-righteous and hyper-judgmental. As a result, the misanthropic appearance of Christian condemnations has caused the church to lose an entire generation of would-be believers.<sup>76</sup> In fact, only 32% of nonChristians have a positive view of self-described born-again believers and only 22% have a positive view of white self-described evangelicals.<sup>77</sup> These perceptions have some basis in fact since studies demonstrate that the more religious people are, the more intolerant they become of differing viewpoints.<sup>78</sup> Sadly, one study even showed a correlation between a family's religiosity and the lack of altruistic, prosocial behavior in children. The more religious the household, the less empathetic

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<sup>73</sup> See for example, Douglas E. Oakman, "Culture, Society, and Embedded Religion in Antiquity," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 35, no. 1 (2005): 4–12, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/01461079050350010201>.

<sup>74</sup> Selma Gago et al., "Extremely High Mutation Rate of a Hammerhead Viroid," *Science* 323, no. 5919 (2009): 1308, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1126/science.1169202>; Rok Krašovec et al., "Spontaneous Mutation Rate Is a Plastic Trait Associated with Population Density Across Domains of Life," *PLOS Biology* 15, no. 8 (2017): e2002731, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pbio.2002731>.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Caroline J. Simon, "Judgmentalism," *Faith and Philosophy* 6, no. 3 (1989): 275–87, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5840/faithphil19896322>.

<sup>76</sup> See the entire discussion in David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity ...And Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 181–204.

<sup>77</sup> Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*, 28.

<sup>78</sup> See Clyde Wilcox and Ted Jelen, "Evangelicals and Political Tolerance," *American Politics Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (January 1990): 25–46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673x9001800102>; Robert D. Woodberry and Christian Smith, "Fundamentalism et al.: Conservative Protestants in America," *Annual Review of Sociology* 24, no. 1 (1998): 25–56, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.24.1.25>; Samuel H. Reimer and Jerry Z. Park, "Tolerant (In)civility? A Longitudinal Analysis of White Conservative Protestants' Willingness to Grant Civil Liberties," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40, no. 4 (December 2001): 735–45, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0021-8294.00088>; and David P. Gushee, *The Future of Faith in American Politics: The Public Witness of the Evangelical Center* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 141–74.

and sensitive children were to issues of social injustice. Children in nonreligious households, on the other hand, showed higher degrees of altruism and empathy for the plight of others.<sup>79</sup> Oftentimes, this judgmentalism and social apathy is justified under the pretense of wanting to call attention to the dangers of sin. In reality, however, Christian claims of benevolence (“hating the sin but loving the sinner”) merely mask the fault-finder’s own hypocrisy.<sup>80</sup> McLaren notes as much elsewhere, “[Evangelical] activists may use the word ‘love’ to justify their behavior, but those who disagree with them are seldom treated with love.”<sup>81</sup>

Significantly, the Buddhist principal of interdependence directly relates to a non-judgmental disposition whereby Buddhist ethics emphasize acceptance and compassion without overt moral condemnation of individuals, which leads directly to Brian McLaren’s article, “Conditions for the Great Religion Singularity.”<sup>82</sup> Here, McLaren employs the Buddhist “law of interdependent origination” to discuss ten factors that have led to institutional Christianity’s religion singularity, including a history of unacknowledged atrocities, scandals, white supremacy, and an overall moral failure in the religion’s leaders.<sup>83</sup> These factors in large part reveal that it would be hypocritical for present-day Christians to be judgmental toward others. According to Ron Sider’s research, “Born-again Christians divorce at about the same rate as everyone else. Self-centered materialism is seducing evangelicals and rapidly destroying our earlier, slightly more generous giving. Only 6 percent of born-again Christians tithe. Born-again Christians justify and engage in sexual promiscuity (both premarital sex and adultery) at astonishing rates. Racism and perhaps physical abuse of wives seem to be worse in evangelical circles than elsewhere. This is scandalous behavior for people who claim to be born-again by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>84</sup> Moreover, a significant number of conservative white evangelicals believe African Americans are naturally lazy and unintelligent. A significant percentage of white evangelicals also oppose laws that protect minorities and are more likely to object to having neighbors of a different race than the general population.<sup>85</sup> As McLaren writes, the moral failure of Christians and Christians leaders “has made claims of one religion’s spiritual supremacy over others literally incredible and ethically reprehensible.”<sup>86</sup> When taken together, McLaren is right

<sup>79</sup> Jean Decety et al., “The Negative Association between Religiousness and Children’s Altruism Across the World,” *Current Biology* 25, no. 22 (2015): 2951–55, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2015.09.056>.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. David A. Spieler, “Hypocrisy: An Exploration of a ‘Third Type,’” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 13, no. 2 (1975): 273–79.

<sup>81</sup> Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions That Are Transforming the Faith*, Pbk. ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 174.

<sup>82</sup> See Sallie B. King, “Buddhist Ethics: Engagement without Judgmentalism,” *Bridges* 13, no. 3/4 (2006): 287–307. On a personal note, it is quite flattering for McLaren to refer to the phenomenon as “The Great Religion Singularity,” an apparent homage to Phyllis Tickle’s work, *The Great Emergence* (Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008]).

<sup>83</sup> Brian D. McLaren, “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>.

<sup>84</sup> Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*, 27–28.

<sup>85</sup> See the statistics in Robert P. Jones, Daniel Cox, and Rachel Lienesch, *Who Sees Discrimination? Attitudes on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Race, and Immigration Status: Findings from PRRI’s American Values Atlas* (Washington, DC: PRRI, 2017), accessed April 5, 2018, <https://www.prii.org/research/americans-views-discrimination-immigrants-blacks-lgbt-sex-marriage-immigration-reform/>; Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*, 24–26; Christian Smith, *Christian America? What Evangelicals Really Want* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 209–12, 221–22; Douglas R. Sharp, “Evangelicals, Racism, and the Limits of Social Science Research,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 33, no. 2 (Winter 2004): 240–45; and Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, Pbk. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), esp. 69–91.

<sup>86</sup> McLaren, “Conditions for the Great Religion Singularity,” 41.



to hypothesize it is the church's reluctance to change and reluctance to address its own moral failures that has led (in part) to the destabilization of institutional Christianity.

With regards to the other conditions that McLaren identifies, they are exceptionally accurate and well-articulated. However, we would argue for more nuance in his observation about "authoritarian centralization." Rather than see the consolidation of ecclesial power as a cause *for* the religion singularity, it might be more accurate to view the singularity phenomenon as the inevitable reaction *to* this consolidation. The more ecclesial authorities attempt to maintain control, the more institutional Christianity fragments. Likewise, McLaren's "military imperialism," where emperors once used violence to convert the Roman Empire, is reminiscent of earlier patristic writers who continually aligned their faith with the thought processes of the Empire, further solidifying the link between religion and culture. Both conditions contributed to, if not outright exasperated, the change-averse nature of current institutional paradigms, which has become the defining characteristic of the religion singularity.

### Conclusion

Overall, the reception and interaction with Ken Howard's article, "The Religion Singularity," has been both positive and informative. From Branch's essay, readers learn of the epistemic foundations that may have contributed to the rapid fragmentation of institutional Christianity. From Lingelbach, readers discover the diversity present in the primitive church, indicating that diversity and fragmentation have been a part of Christianity's history since the beginning. Seybold's article reveals an apparent direct correlation between the polarization of American politics and the disintegration of the church. Eller's article explains the importance of recognizing the natural evolutionary processes of speciation, hybridization, and extinction inherent to all religious belief systems. Finally, with McLaren's article, readers come to understand how institutional Christianity's failure to live up to its own ethical norms undermines its long-term viability. In each essay, the author presents a different perspective for how or why the religion singularity is a present reality in the church today.

As it relates to the religion singularity phenomenon directly, the actual factors that cause a particular church or whole denomination to grow (or decline) are, in reality, a complex system of interrelated congregational personalities and characteristics, such as the ability to retain a strong youth membership, innovative and joyful services, a robust focus on evangelism and charity, support for interreligious dialogue, and the belief that God is active in the life of the congregation.<sup>87</sup> In fact, one study reveals that conservative denominations tend to have higher birth rates where female congregants produced more children at younger ages, thereby accounting for much of evangelical membership in decades past. The same study shows that other factors play a role, such as the fact that conservative conversions to mainline groups have diminished while apostasy rates have increased among liberals.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> See for example, Haskell, Flatt, and Burgoyne, "Theology Matters," 516–17; Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*, 235–83; and Tamney and Johnson, "The Popularity of Strict Churches," 209–23. Cf. Thomas and Olson, "Testing the Strictness Thesis," 619–39.

<sup>88</sup> Hout, Greeley, and Wilde, "The Demographic Imperative in Religious Change," 468–500. See also, Hadaway and Marler, "Growth and Decline in the Mainline," 20.

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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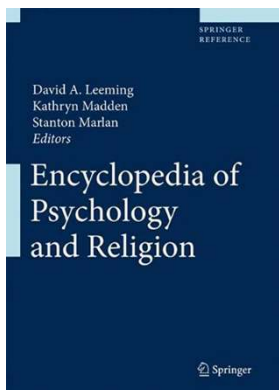
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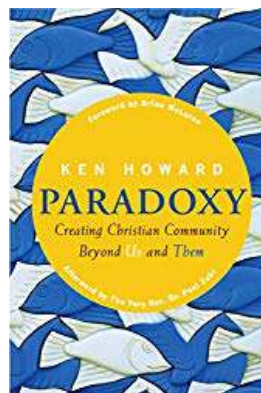
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