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The Religion Singularity

A Demographic Crisis Destabilizing and Transforming
Institutional Christianity

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The Religion Singularity: A Demographic Crisis Destabilizing and Transforming Institutional Christianity

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to trace the emergence of a worldwide church demographic crisis that the author calls the “Religion Singularity,” and to project its impact on the future of institutional Christianity. For nineteen centuries, Christianity experienced strong and steady growth in the total numbers of Christians, worship centers, and denominations worldwide. Since then growth in the number of Christians has continued largely unchanged. But growth in the number of denominations and worship centers turned sharply upward in recent decades, substantially exceeding the growth rate of the total Christian population. This differential is driving a concurrent decline in the size of those institutions to unsustainable levels by the end of the century. The author suggests that denominations are unlikely to survive this severe downsizing. Meanwhile, given their smaller size and more organic structure, worship centers are more likely to survive the religion singularity than their larger counterparts, but only if they are willing to become vision-guided and experimental.

Keywords: Christianity, Denomination, Denominational Decline, Fragmentation, Institutional Christianity, Religion Singularity, Singularity, Sustainability, Technological Singularity, Worship Center

Introduction

In 2006, author, inventor, and futurist Ray Kurzweil published *The Technological Singularity: When Humans Transcend Biology*, in which he argued that the exponentially increasing processing power of artificial/machine intelligence would overtake the rate of increase of unaugmented human intelligence by the mid-twenty-first century. Kurzweil (2006) claimed that this point of convergence—or singularity—would mark the end of humanity as we know it and its evolution into human-machine hybrid, as humans begin to augment their intelligence in order to understand and remain in some semblance of control over machine intelligence. Institutional Christianity is at a similar crossroads today. A comparison of the ever-increasing and fragmentation-driven growth rates of denominations and worship centers (i.e. individual worship sites) to the steady but slower rise in the Christian population as a whole, reveals that the former has overtaken the latter, driving a drastic decline in the size of denominations and worship centers that will make their present forms unsustainable by the end of this century (Bonk 2014; Johnson and Grim 2014; Johnson and Zurlo 2007).

The term “religion singularity” intentionally pairs the terms “religion” and “singularity” from seemingly distinct disciplines to help those trained in the field of faith—usually at a particular seminary, denomination, or faith tradition—to see beyond the presuppositions that paradigms impose. While there may not be a direct relationship between similar-appearing phenomena in entirely different fields, one phenomenon can still serve as an analogy—or even as an example of a parallel evolution—through which to understand the other (Moulaert, MacCallum, and Hillier 2013). The term “religion” is used in the sense of a “system of beliefs, symbols and practices that addresses the nature of existence” (James and Mandaville 2010, vii–viii) or a “unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things” (Durkheim 1915, 47). The term “singularity” is used in the sense of Kurzweil’s *Technological Singularity*, which is an intersection of trends that produces transformational and unpredictable effects. The term is also employed in its mathematical and astrophysical senses, the former to describe its characteristics

when graphed and the latter to evoke its potentially staggering impact on institutional Christianity.

Indeed, the evidence suggests that the religion singularity is beyond mere speculation. It is real, it is accelerating, and institutional Christianity may have already passed beyond the event horizon. While the rates of change involved are not perfectly even, the overall trends appear sufficiently persistent to continue into the next century and are consistent with other global, regional, and national data (Barrett and Johnson 2001; Johnson and Grim 2014; Johnson and Ross 2009; Johnson and Zurlo 2007).

The Future of World Religions report—produced by the Pew Center in cooperation with the John Templeton Foundation—predicts that, with the singular exception of Buddhism, the total populations of all major religious groups are expected to increase between 2010 and 2050 (Hackett et al 2015). Christianity is projected to grow by nearly 750 million adherents. Yet, with the notable exception of Islam, most of these religions will not keep pace with global population growth. This means that most will have shrunk to a smaller proportion of the total global population than in 2010. Christianity, despite apparently strong and steady growth, will remain the same percentage of the world’s population as in 2010 (Hackett et al 2015; Hackett and Grim 2012). Meanwhile, Christianity continues to shift toward the developing nations of the majority world (Johnson 2005; Johnson and Chung 2004), with the Christian growth in Africa and Asia currently outstripping the total population growth of those continents (Johnson and Ross 2009).

Yet in almost every Western country, Christianity continues to decline as a portion of the population, while the numbers of unaffiliated are expected to rise. In the United States, the unaffiliated had increased to 26 percent of the population by 2010. Polls show that trust in organized religion is rapidly declining in the United States (Saad 2012). Meanwhile, the “Nones”—those who check “none of the above” as their religious preference—have become the largest and fastest growing religious demographic (Smith 2014; Funk and Smith 2012), and the “Dones”—a subset of the Nones consisting of once-active churches members who have left their churches but not their faith—are rising nearly as fast as the Nones (Packard 2015; Packard and Hope 2015). Church attendance in the United States has been in decline for decades, now affecting even conservative denominations (Chaves 2011a, 2011b; Barna and Kinnaman 2014; Hadaway and Marler 2006). The percentage of people self-identifying as Christian has dropped for the first time since the founding of the country (Smith 2014). Secularism is on the rise (Barna and Kinnaman 2014), and the percentage of Americans holding “post-Christian” beliefs (i.e. beliefs inconsistent with traditional Christian orthodoxy) has risen by 7 percent in just two years, from 37 percent in 2013 to 44 percent in 2015 (Barna 2015). Meanwhile, non-church-going people are less likely to consider going to church than ever before (Barna and Kinnaman 2014). Church attendance is no longer a “mainstream activity.” If anything, the reality of church attendance and engagement may even be less frequent than these polls portray, as respondents to questions about their religious practices tend to inflate their involvement in religious institutions (Chaves 2011a).

Many have pondered the theological significance of these statistics and their implications for the future of institutional Christianity. Some have been circumspect in their predictions. Others have been expansive. In 2010, Howard suggested that the very paradigm of religion as an “organized system of beliefs, ceremonies, and rules” (Durkheim 1915, 47) was rapidly fading as a unifying force within Christianity and that Christianity as an organized religion was “hanging by a thread” (Howard 2016, 47).¹ With similar restraint, Zscheile (2015) argued that disruptive innovations were driving a deinstitutionalization of Christianity, yet he limited his predictions about the future church, beyond observing that it would have to be much more agile.

Others have been more expansive in their predictions. Relying on a blend of statistics and interpersonal anecdotes to support her claims, Butler Bass (2013, 3) argued that the declines in

¹ Specifically, I argued that three unifying paradigms of institutional Christianity were collapsing: religion (i.e. unity via security), foundationalism (i.e. unity via certainty), and Christendom (i.e. unity via control).

church trust and membership will not only bring about the end of Christianity as a religion, but also that even now we are “caught up in the throes of great spiritual awakening.” She argues that we are witnessing the dawning of a new age of the spirit or a fourth great awakening, which she describes as a “great turning toward a global community based on shared human connection, dedicated to the care of our planet, committed to justice and equality, that seeks to raise hundreds of millions from poverty, violence, and oppression” (Butler Bass 2013, 5–6). In a similar manner, Tickle (2008) portrays the current trend as a postmodern “Great Emergence.” A few, like Bellofatto (2012), have made very specific predictions about what Christianity will be like in the year 2100.

These predictions are theoretical hypotheses expressed in theological terms. They are attempts to attribute theological meaning to the facts at hand in order to foresee the direction of Christianity and how faith leaders might best prepare their communities for change. Yet, because that change remains unclear, it is natural for those who speculate about the future of faith to press for theological clarity. As Chaves (2011b) points out, it is tempting to overthink this issue theologically, but sometimes what is needed is not more theory but more fact. Indeed, it would be helpful if forecasters of the future of Christianity were willing to put their theories in the form of testable hypotheses that facts might confirm or deny. Expansive predictions, like those made by Bass and Tickle, are difficult to test. They are not necessarily untrue, but are simply difficult to prove or disprove. Conversely, narrower hypotheses—that the institutional church is disintegrating (Howard 2010) or deinstitutionalizing (Zscheile 2015)—are easier to test. While the projections in this article point to a broad impact, they are quantifiable and anchored in publically available data.

For several decades, the *Bulletin of Missionary Research* has published an annual worldwide statistical analysis of the Christian church. Called the “Status of Global Mission”—or SGM—it tracks seventy-three discrete demographic measures related to the Christian world mission, with comparisons to other major world religions. This article will focus on three of these measures—the number of denominations worldwide, the number of worship centers, and the total population of Christians worldwide. SGM is consistent with other sources, such as the World Christian Database (Johnson and Zurlo 2007) and the *Atlas of Global Christianity, 1910–2010* (Johnson and Ross 2010).

To understand the significance of the data presented in this article, it is necessary to understand what the authors of SGM mean by the above terms. The term “denomination” refers to any formal association of multiple worship centers, whether or not they describe their association using that term. In other words, in addition to the familiar mainline denominations, this definition would also include multisite megachurches and other Christian traditions that eschew the term “denomination.” Meanwhile, the term “worship center” means any discrete physical location at which groups of Christians gather to worship on a regular basis. Using again the example of the multisite megachurch, a megachurch with one central location and seven remote locations would be counted as eight worship centers but only one denomination. Also, while the term “worship center” is related to the terms “church” or “congregation,” it is not interchangeable with them. In many parts of the world, economic conditions and/or legal restrictions constrain the number of worship centers that can be built, driving the number of Christians per worship center higher in those areas. All worship centers contain congregations but not all congregations have their own worship centers. Finally, it is important to understand that not all people who self-identify as Christian are associated with a worship center or a denomination. This means that the figures given as the average number of Christians per worship center and per denomination should not be read as average membership numbers of these institutions but rather as gross comparisons of the total numbers of these institutions worldwide against the total population of Christians (Bonk 2014).

Defining Singularity

The term “singularity” was first adopted by the field of mathematics to signify the point at which the results of an equation exceed finite limitation, accelerating toward infinity but never reaching it, such as when a constant is divided by numbers approaching zero. The field of astrophysics was next to adopt the term to describe what happens when a star collapses after a supernova explosion, creating a black hole. While the words “singularity” and “black hole” are often used interchangeably, an astrophysical singularity is actually the point within a black hole when mass becomes infinitely large and size becomes infinitely small. The point at which it accelerates toward infinity is called the “event horizon,” past which not even light can escape, and the effects of which are so extreme that some have referred to it as a rupture in the fabric of space and time (Kurzweil 2006; Lasota 1999; Mencher 1971; Weaver 2003).

Finally, the field of technology appropriated the term to depict the point at which technological development outstrips human development, creating a phenomenon of runaway change. It was first mentioned in the 1950s by information theorist John von Neumann, who theorized that the “ever-accelerating progress of technology” soon would give rise to “some essential singularity in the history of the race beyond which human affairs, as we know them, could not continue” (quoted in Ulam 1958, 5). It was ultimately popularized by Ray Kurzweil, who coined the term “technological singularity” to portray the point at which machine intelligence would outstrip unaided human intelligence and likened the event to a “rupture in the fabric of human history” because of its potentially transformational and irreversible effects on humanity (Kurzweil 2006, 17).

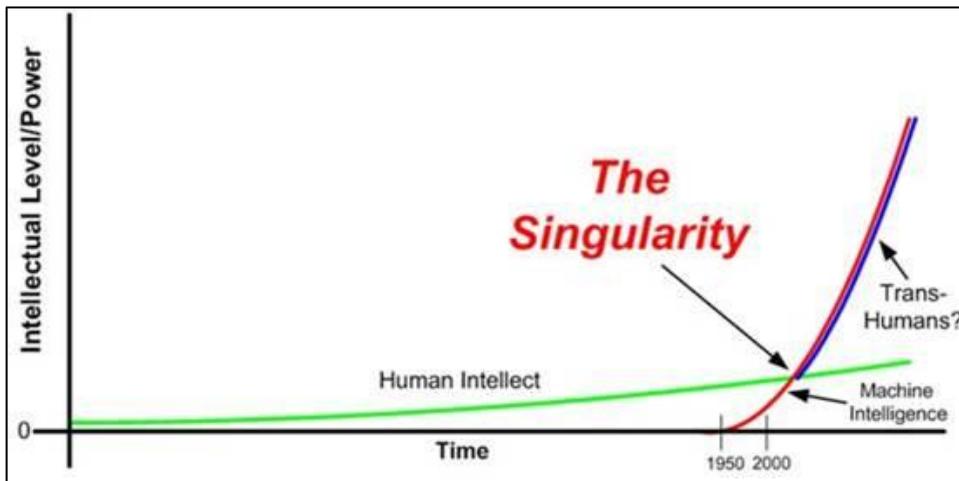


Figure 1: Technological Singularity
Source: Kurzweil 2006

In all of these fields, singularity describes the last phase of a phenomenon that shares three discrete stages:

1. Slow Take Off: Change is slow and relatively linear.
2. Acceleration: Change picks up speed so fast that it turns sharply upwards.
3. Singularity: Change passes a point of no return and accelerates toward infinity.

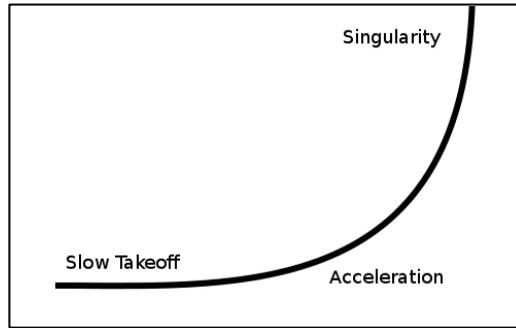


Figure 2: Characteristics of a Singularity
 Source: Kurzweil 2006

Each one of these characteristics—slow take off, acceleration, and singularity—is demonstrably present in the phenomenon currently affecting institutional Christianity.

The Data Behind Christianity’s Religion Singularity

The graphs in Figures 3, 5, 6, and 7 each represent two sets of figures. The first part of each trend line depicts demographic data on institutional Christianity from 1800 to 2014. The second part portrays an extrapolation of that data from 2015 to 2100. The projected portions of the trend lines are anchored in trends comprised of historical data. In addition, each represents a small, three-century portion of a larger historical dataset extending back to the first century.

Examining these graphs, one will quickly discover that all three elements of a singularity-like trend are there—slow take off, acceleration, and singularity—all evident within the historical segments of the graphs. These trends began in the late nineteenth century and became firmly established long before the end of the twentieth century.

Growth in Total Denominations World Wide

Figure 3 depicts the total number of denominations from 1800 to 2014 (Bonk 2014), and then presents two possible extrapolations into the future. The term includes both denominations that split off from others (the vast majority) and those that originated without a precursor. One can see all three elements of a singularity.

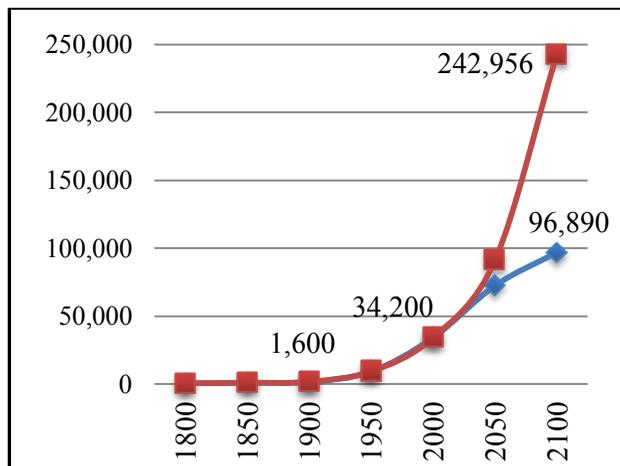


Figure 3: Christians per Denomination
 Source: Bonk 2014

1800–1900 CE: Slow Take Off. If one were to extend the historical portion of the graph back to the first century, it would become clear that, despite numerous spikes of rapid growth along the way, the graph is remarkable for its strong, steady, and linear growth of the number of denominations over the first eighteen centuries of Christianity’s existence. Starting with little institutionalization—and thus no institutional divisions and no denominations *per se*—at its inception (denominations, as such, developed later), the church had divided into about 1,600 denominations by the year 1900. This translates into a growth rate of a little less than one new denomination per year (Bonk 2014).

1900–1950 CE: Acceleration. At the beginning of the twentieth century—driven in large part by an increased rate of denominational fragmentation (Lee 2009)—growth in the number of denominations turned sharply upward. In the fifty years between 1900 and 1950, the number of Christian denominations worldwide expanded from 1,600 to 9,300. In other words, six times the number of denominations was created in the first half of the twentieth century than in the previous nineteen centuries combined (Bonk 2014). This is where the trend line accelerates toward infinity.

1950–2014 CE: Approaching Singularity. In the second half of the twentieth century, the rate of increase of denominations continued to accelerate. From 1950 to 2000, the number of denominations grew from 9,300 to 34,200, twenty times the number existing at the beginning of the century. By 2014, the number of denominations stood at roughly 45,000 (Bonk 2014). This trend has all the characteristics of a singularity. But what kind of singularity is Christianity entering? A black hole, from which there is no escape? Or a wormhole, which will transport it into an entirely different location in space-time? Has institutional Christianity already passed a point of no return? Or will this accelerating trend taper off at some point in future and become the Church’s new normal?

Projecting Future Growth in the Number of Denominations

The answer to these questions depends on the assumptions one makes. There are two possibilities. If the growth/fragmentation rate is subject to a resource effect—that is, dependent on finite resources—then the growth curve will slow and plateau as finite resources are consumed, and the growth curve will become S-shaped, like the sigmoidal growth curve illustrated in Figure 4. However, if the growth being measured is resource independent, the rate of growth will continue to accelerate indefinitely into a singularity.

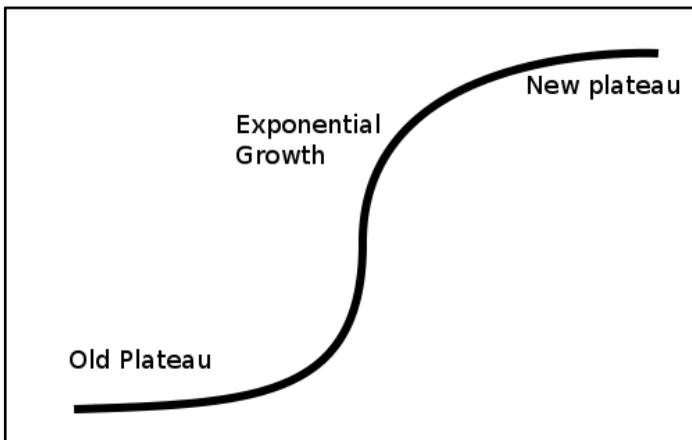


Figure 4: Sigmoid Curve (Resource Effect)
 Source: Kurzweil 2006

In the case of denominational growth, the primary—though not the sole or exclusive—resource necessary for continued denominational fracturing is the number of Christians. While the total Christian population continues to grow, it is ultimately a finite number. This makes a resource effect likely at some point in the future. The question is, how long will the accelerating growth/fragmentation rate continue before it encounters a resource effect?

Assuming a Resource Effect

The projections contained in *Status of Global Mission 2014* (SGM) appear to anticipate a resource effect entering the equation starting in 2015. According to their prediction, the denominational growth/fragmentation rate—currently 1.98 percent per year—will begin to fall off at a rate of about 0.013 percent annually through 2025 and (presumably) will continue to decline into the foreseeable future (Bonk 2014). Yet even if we extend SGM’s projections—including their assumed resource effect—the growth/fragmentation rate of denominations would not fully plateau until the middle of the twenty-second century. Meanwhile, by the end of this century, the total number of denominations worldwide will have reached almost 97,000, which would be more than 6,000 percent growth in just 200 years.

Assuming No Resource Effect

As astonishing as this number may seem, there is little reason to believe that the resource effect assumed by SGM 2014 is actually taking place now or will take place in the near future. While SGM has been predicting for nearly a decade an imminent decline in the annual growth rate of denominations, heralding the onset of a resource effect, the current growth rate has hovered at or near the current rate for decades. Moreover, SGM offers no rationale for assuming a near-term onset of a resource effect (Bonk 2014).

If one eliminates the assumption of a resource effect and projects forward the current rate of growth in the number of denominations, the results are even more remarkable. By 2100, one would see more than 240,000 denominations. This would be a 15,000 percent increase over the number of denominations that existed in the year 1900, in less than one-tenth of the time it took the first 1,600 denominations to arise. This is not to say that total denominations will continue at this higher growth rate indefinitely, but, rather, that this higher growth rate is the likely upper limit of growth and that the actual growth rate could fall anywhere between this upper limit and the lower limit that assumes an earlier resource effect.

Projecting Future Growth in Total Worship Centers

Figure 5 shows remarkably similar growth in the total number of worship centers. All elements of a singularity are included: slow take off, acceleration, and singularity.

1800–1900 CE: Slow Takeoff. Over the first eighteen centuries of Christianity’s existence, the number of worship centers worldwide grew to about 400,000 (Bonk 2014). Like the graph for denominations in Figure 3, the graph for number of worship centers in Figure 5 is also part of a larger historical dataset reaching back to the first century. Similarly, expanding any smaller portion of that earlier period would show a number of growth spikes along the way, some quite significant in their narrower context. Yet viewed in the context of the full lifespan of Christianity, the trend appears remarkably strong, steady, and linear overall.

1900–1950 CE: Acceleration. Soon after the beginning of the twentieth century, the growth in the number of worship centers accelerated dramatically. By 1950, the total number of worship centers worldwide had grown to almost one million, a roughly 250 percent increase in just fifty years. 2.5 times more worship centers sprang into existence in this half century than in the previous nineteen centuries combined (Bonk 2014).

1950–2014 CE: Approaching Singularity. By the year 2000, the total number of worship centers worldwide had grown to 3.5 million. In 2014, the number exceeded 4.7 million, and appears to be on its way to 7.5 million by 2025. In fact, at 2.4 percent, the annual rate of growth/fragmentation in the number of worship centers is even more pronounced than the 1.98 percent rate reached by denominations (Bonk 2014).

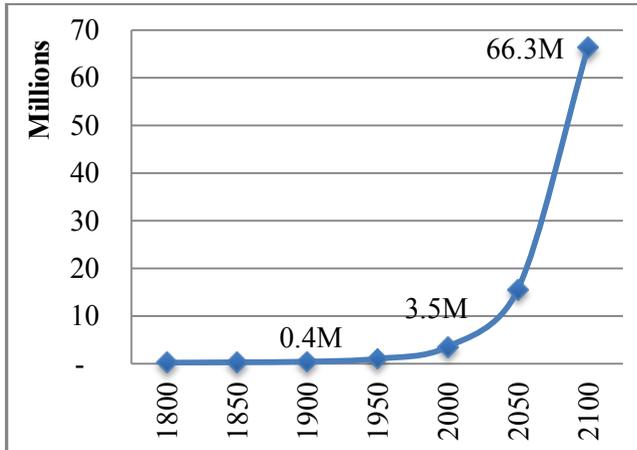


Figure 5: Growth in Total Worship Centers Worldwide
Source: Bonk 2014

The Impact of the Religion Singularity

The numerical growth of denominations and worship centers is astonishing in itself. Yet its full significance only becomes clear when compared to the growth of the total worldwide Christian population. By itself the 1.32 percent annual rate of increase for the total Christian population worldwide (Bonk 2014), shown in Figure 6, appears impressive. But compared to the 1.98 percent annual growth/splintering rates of denominations and the 2.4 percent rate for worship centers, it becomes clear that there is a substantial difference. The rate of increase of the total Christian population is running 33 percent below that of denominations and 45 percent below that of worship centers. This gap will ultimately place pressure on the sustainability of denominations and worship centers over time.

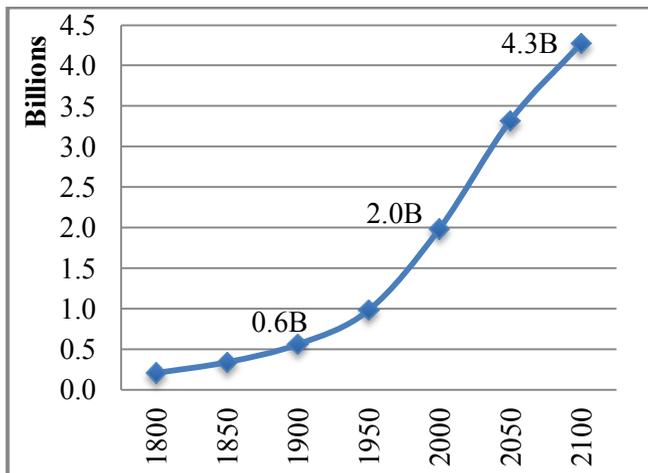


Figure 6: Growth in Total Christians Worldwide
Source: Bonk 2014

Impact on Denomination Size

Indeed, when we subtract the growth rate per year of the worldwide Christian population from the growth rate of the total number of denominations, it becomes evident that the average number of Christians per denomination (CPD) has dropped substantially over the last century and that this downward trend will likely continue to decrease for decades to come. As Figure 7 illustrates, CPD dropped from about 349,000 to about 58,000 between 1900 and 2000 (Bonk 2014). How much will it continue to drop in the current century? It depends on whether or not a resource effect slows the growth/fragmentation rate of denominations. If it does, CPD would decline to about 44,000 by 2100 (an 87 percent decline in 200 years). If it does not, however, CPD will drop to 17,500 by 2100 (a 95 percent drop).

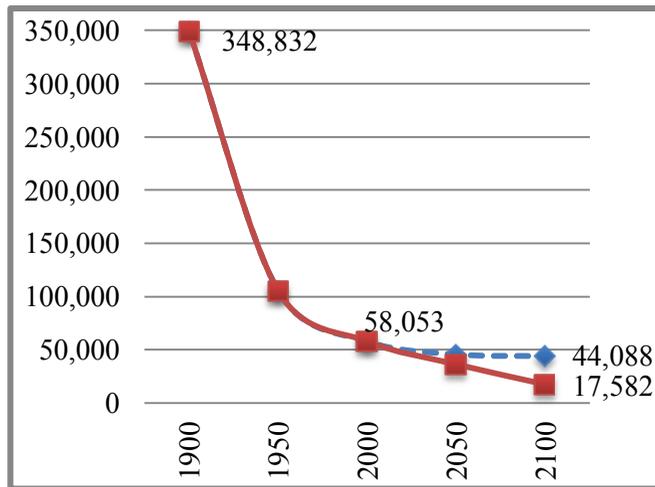


Figure 7: Decline in Christians per Denomination (CPD) Worldwide
Source: Bonk 2014

To fully comprehend the severity of the decline, it is important to understand that CPD is not equivalent to members per denomination (MPD), because it includes the entire Christian population worldwide, including those not associated with a worship center and its denomination. The actual average number of MPD would be considerably lower, which translates to an even greater decline.

Impact on Worship Center Size

Given the markedly higher growth/fragmentation rate of worship centers, it should come as no surprise that the resulting rate of decline in the number of Christians per worship center (CPW) is also markedly higher. As shown in Figure 8, in 1900, the number of CPW worldwide was nearly 1,400. By 2000, it dropped beneath 600. Extrapolating forward, by 2050 CPW worldwide would have dropped to just above 200 and by 2100, if the trend does not change, the number would be slightly above sixty (Bonk 2014).

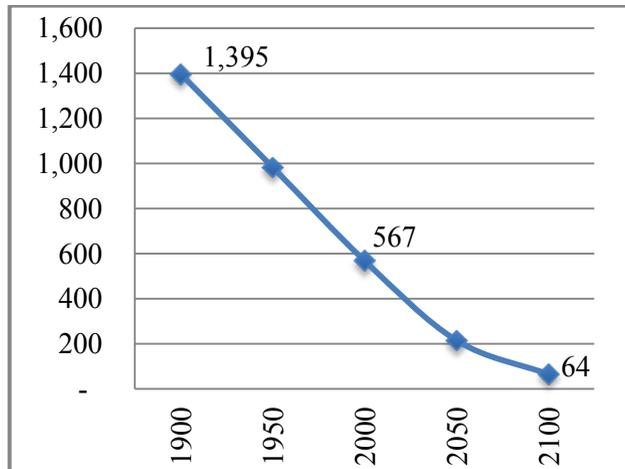


Figure 8: Decline in Christians per Worship Center (CPW) Worldwide
Source: Bonk 2014

As before, to fully comprehend the magnitude of this decline, it is important to understand that Christians per worship center is not equivalent to members per worship center, since it includes the entire Christian population worldwide, including those not associated with a worship center. The actual average number of members per worship center would be considerably lower, which translates to an even more drastic drop.

Black Hole or Wormhole? (Beyond the Event Horizon)

So what lies ahead for institutional Christianity? The trends examined above have been strong and consistent for decades. There is little reason to expect that they will plateau in the immediate future. Resource effect or not, there is little that can be done to slow the downward slide sufficiently to allow denominations and worship centers to remain sustainable in their current forms. To that extent, it seems clear that whether it is entering a black hole or a wormhole, institutional Christianity has already passed the event horizon and is committed to whatever lies ahead. One possibility is that institutional Christianity may continue indefinitely down the path of fragmentation, splintering into new denominations and worship centers at an ever-increasing rate until both are so small as to be virtually unsustainable in their current form. Another possibility is that denominations may cease to exist and that worship centers may evolve into an entirely different form, capable of surviving and thriving in increasingly uncertain and rapidly changing times. This brings us to the question of sustainability.

There are many ways to define organizational sustainability. All start with the obvious: financial self-reliance, that is, continued existence. However, while financial self-reliance is a necessary element of organizational sustainability, it is not sufficient in itself. A sustainable organization must also be able to achieve organizational mission and goals while maintaining essential functions, to live up to its vision and values, and to maintain a sustainable environment (Coblentz 2002). To be sustainable an organization must also have the capacities to maintain vision, to motivate vision-oriented culture, to uphold decisiveness and accountability, to engage stakeholders, and to sustain flexibility in the ways it achieves financial support, meets program goals, responds to community needs, and diversifies and leverages resources (York 2010).

Denominational Sustainability

It is exceedingly difficult, by any combination of the above measures, to make a case for the sustainability of denominations. Even the most rudimentary prerequisite for denominational

sustainability, mere survival as institutions, is hard to imagine. Denominational capacity for financial self-reliance is likely to become severely strained, continuing to diminish as denominations proliferate in number and decline in membership.

However, institutional preservation alone is not true sustainability, especially in the case of faith-based organizations. As denominations become increasingly consumed with merely maintaining their existence, it will likely become increasingly difficult for them to focus on their mission and to live according to their vision and values. Even when they attempt to re-imagine themselves to meet the challenges of change and uncertainty, the leadership of denominations may find their survival instincts, along with their desire to protect their influence and power, increasingly undermining their creative efforts, producing disappointing results (Schmidt 2015).

It seems unlikely that denominations will find a way to become sustainable and much more likely that the fragmentation and decline of denominations will continue until they ultimately collapse. Denominational leaders continue to attend more to institutional maintenance than organizational mission, focusing on negotiating mergers and associations rather than on clarifying vision. Yet, ironically, given the compromises necessary to form such groupings, the more denominations merge or associate, the less homogenous—and the more diverse—they unavoidably will become, with fewer doctrines and practices held in common by all the members of each new denominational grouping.

Worship Center Sustainability

Worship centers face the same singularity of change as denominations. Their ever-increasing number continues to drive a concurrent and continuous decrease in average size. While there are many ways to organize local Christian worshipping communities, most worship centers involve gathering the worshipping community in some sort of building or other physical space in a way that separates and protects them from the world around them. Because this requires some sort of dedicated and separate space, the further downward the average number of Christians per worship center drops, the more difficult it becomes to imagine any but the smallest and most organic forms of stand-alone worship centers (e.g. house church and other less formal gatherings) surviving with their current organizational models intact. Financial sustainability alone would be extremely difficult.

Compared to denominations, worship centers, by their nature, may be more flexible when confronting the changes and challenges they both face. Because the majority of their ministries and programs are carried out by unpaid volunteers within a flatter organizational structure, churches/worship centers are much less dependent on a large base of supporting members than denominational structures, which tend to be more hierarchical with a greater percentage of paid staff. Consequently, it will likely be easier for individual worship centers—even as they grow smaller—to become more flexible, adaptive, and creative in the face of these changes.

Individual worship centers may also find it easier to welcome diversity of opinion over doctrine and practice than traditional denominations, which were created, in large part, to preserve and defend particular theological and ecclesiological points of view. Because of their higher level of adaptability, worship centers may be more successful than denominations in surviving and thriving in the midst of a general population increasingly distrustful of institutional religion and skeptical of enforced uniformity of doctrine and practice.

To survive and thrive, faith leaders will have to experiment with different, less building-centric, and perhaps even less institution-centric ways of gathering their worshipping communities. One might imagine a future in which a worship center partners with a developer, an architectural firm, a construction company, a bank, and several for-profit companies and non-profit service organizations to design, fund, build, and occupy a mixed-use campus. In this configuration, the worship center would be neither owner nor major occupier, but, rather, a catalyst for initial involvement and investment. Focusing on meeting the most important

community needs and aspirations, and drawing upon its individual and organizational assets, the worship center might partner with a school, a coffee shop, a theater, a recreational complex, affordable housing, or a supported-living facility. Alternatively, groups from multiple faith traditions might come together to develop a multifaith worship campus, building and operating out of separate worship centers on the same site while sharing the cost of land, utilities, and maintenance. Or they might design, build, and operate out of a single, shared, multifaith center, worshipping in the same space on their traditional worship days.

Such alternate possibilities are not farfetched. In fact, some are happening already, albeit in small numbers and in an ad hoc, experimental fashion at the edges of institutional Christianity (Burke 2015; Dollarhide 2016), while others are being adapted from Christianity's monastic past (Howard 2016). It is possible that in the future such approaches might become the rule rather than the exception. Or, they might make way for something completely different. Indeed, the models of organization that emerge in Christianity's future might well be beyond the capacity of present-day faith leaders to imagine. It is precisely because the starting point of worship centers is significantly smaller and more organic that they may find it easier to engage in the experimentation necessary to discover the capacities of leadership, adaptability, and program capacity that are essential to organizational sustainability (York 2010).

Yet while worship centers may have a greater capacity for adaptation than denominations, it remains to be seen how many worship centers will attempt it, let alone succeed in it, especially when what is required is the willingness to let go of a deep-rooted institutional paradigm without any certainty of what is emerging to take its place. Only those that develop sufficient vision, creativity, and experimental culture will be able to survive the process of adaptation and thrive in the emerging ecclesiastical paradigm.

The “Gravitational” Effects of the Religion Singularity

Much as an astronomical singularity creates a tidal effect that distorts the fabric of space-time around it and begins to draw all surrounding matter toward its event horizon, the religion singularity will also exert a wide gravitational pull. While the deinstitutionalization of Christianity likely will begin with the collapse of denominations and the re-formation of local worship centers, it is highly unlikely to end there. Rather, it will exert an effect that will collapse many religious structures, processes, and practices, making room for more sustainable and adaptive structures, processes, and practices to arise.

Imagine, if you will, how just one ecclesiastical process—vocations and training—might be transformed by the effects of the religion singularity:

- Vocations. In Western countries, as worship centers become smaller, demand for full-time, mono-vocational pastors will likely decrease, while the demand for part-time, bi-vocational pastors likely will increase. A major challenge will be developing a structure to support bi-vocational pastors long term. A major benefit of bi-vocational ministry is that under such circumstances pastors will likely be less isolated from the challenges faced by the congregations and communities they serve, which in turn might make them more sensitive and adaptable to their needs. Indeed, this is already the case in much of the majority world and has been for most of the history of Christianity (Cox 1997).
- Vocational Training. Without denominational structures to require and support increasingly expensive, multi-year, residential, advanced-degree programs for church pastors, the demand for such programs is likely to decrease. In their place are likely to arise alternative forms of vocational education that are virtually based and experientially oriented and, therefore, less expensive. As with vocations, the result would be greater context sensitivity and adaptability.

Critiquing the Religion Singularity Analysis

The author anticipates several lines of argument against this analysis of the religion singularity, both general and specific.

The author oversimplifies the data. Perhaps the most serious critique that could be leveled is that of oversimplification. In the numerical analysis, it could be argued that in pointing out the overall trend lines, the author has overlooked the variation along the way: the numerous spikes of growth through the history of Christianity. Similarly, it might be argued that the author has ignored the myriad interrelated factors that drive growth rates of worldwide and local populations, the growth rates of global and local Christian populations, and the growth or decline of the numbers or sizes of denominations and/or worship centers. Both are fair criticisms. It is true that the author has chosen to focus on overall trends rather than variations within them. But the author would argue that the greater error would have been to obscure the overall decline in the sustainability of institutional Christianity by giving detailed attention to particularities. It is precisely because the overall trends are so clear, strong, and persistent that author has chosen not to obscure the macro-analysis with microanalysis.

The author rests too much analysis on one data source. A second critique would be that the author relies too much on a single source of data: the “Status of Global Mission” annual reports, supplied by the *Bulletin of Missionary Research*. However, the data provided by SGM is consistent with that supplied by several other sources, including the World Christian Database (Johnson and Zurlo 2007), the World Religion Database (Johnson and Grim 2016), the Atlas of Global Christianity (Johnson and Ross 2009), World Christian Trends (Barrett and Johnson 2001), and others.

The author ignores higher growth in megachurches and conservative churches. Similarly, critics might also ask if the religion singularity analysis is not overlooking growth in megachurches—which tend to be conservative—both in number and membership (Stetzer 2013). It is true that the number and membership of megachurches are still growing. It is also true that conservative/evangelical megachurches are much more common than liberal/progressive megachurches (Thumma and Bird 2015b). Yet there are several questions about the growth of megachurches. Have megachurches grown as much as the numbers make it seem, or do they merely start large and stay large? Are megachurches immune from the religion singularity, or are they simply too recent a phenomenon to be showing its effects? Recent surveys have shown that while the number of megachurches has continued to rise, growth in membership has slowed. Megachurches are having a harder time attracting younger members, and megachurches that are more than twenty years old are beginning to show signs of decreased congregational vitality. Indeed, what was a sharp increase for several decades has recently begun to slow (Stetzer 2013; Thumma and Bird 2015a; Warren, Brooks, and Cromartie 2005). Meanwhile, conservative churches and denominations as a whole are experiencing an even greater slowdown in recent decades (Hadaway and Marler 2006), with some entering a period of drastic decline in baptisms, even as their number of worship centers increase (Allen 2016; Pipes 2016).

The author ignores higher growth in majority world churches. Critics might also point out that (largely conservative) churches in the majority world are currently experiencing higher growth (Hackett and Grim 2012; Johnson and Ross 2009). Again, this may well be true in the short term. In Africa, Asia, and elsewhere the growth rate of Christianity is outstripping national population growth rates in those regions (Johnson and Ross 2009). Yet Christianity in the majority world is characterized by the same kind of fragmentation described earlier. In Africa, for example, fragmentation appears along lines of cultural identity, doctrine, ecclesiology, mission strategy, social and ecumenical concern, pastoral approach, political leanings, and adherences to local social mores and traditions (Mugambi 2009). The overall global trend is clear: for decades the rate of growth/fragmentation of denominations and worship centers has

remained strong and steady at about twice the rate of growth of the Christian population worldwide and there are few, if any, signs that will change in the near future.

The above critiques do not negate the central premise of the religion singularity: demographic trends are rendering institutional Christianity unsustainable in its current forms. The trends have been strong and persistent for decades. The various successes and intricacies of individual ministries do not counter the overall upward trend in the number of denominations and worship centers and the overall downward trend in their sizes. Even if one or more of the above critiques proved to be accurate, resulting in small changes in the projected future segments of the trends, it would not change the fact that the present rate of growth in the number of denominations and worship centers is appreciably higher than the growth rate in the total number of Christians worldwide.

Summary

Christianity is in the midst of a worldwide expansion in the number of denominations and worship centers. Sometime in the last several decades the growth rate of new and breakaway denominations and worship centers surpassed and now substantially exceeds the growth rate of the entire Christian population worldwide. This differential is driving a concurrent decline in the size of those institutions to unsustainable levels by the end of the century. Given their large sizes and hierarchical structures, denominations seem unlikely to survive this severe downsizing. They neither have—nor are they likely to develop—the capabilities necessary to survive this downsizing. Meanwhile, given their smaller size and more organic structure, worship centers are more likely to survive the religion singularity than their larger counterparts, but only if they are willing to become more experimental. It seems clear that the old, institutional paradigm of Christianity is the process of dying, and a new paradigm is in the process of being born. With denominations and churches splitting at an ever-increasing rate, and growing ever smaller as a result, Christianity may well end up 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.

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