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After the Denominozoic

Evolution, Differentiation, Denominationalism

by Jon Bialecki

In this paper I argue that sociological denomination theory, despite its success in describing historic denomination cycles, has limits to its contemporary use and does not match the ethnographic description of the variety of ways in which denominationalism is expressed in anthropological ethnographies of Christianity. The cause of this mismatch is placed at the feet of unilinear models of denominational evolution. In its place, a differential model of autopoietic denominational evolution is suggested, where denominations are seen as different and differing solutions to an insistent Christian problematic. The capacities of this model are explored through the Vineyard, an association of charismatic churches that originated in Southern California.

When you come to a fork in the road, take it. Yogi Berra

The Sociology and Anthropology of the Denominozoic Era

It may be an exaggeration to describe the sociological literature on denominationalism as moribund, but perhaps its pallor is not the best. Inaugurated by foundational texts from Weber (1968), Toennies et al. 1973), and Troelstch (1992 [1931]) and filtered through and distributed by Niebuhr (1957), the subsequent literature (along with the “penumbra” literatures on near-correlate sociological problem categories such as church sect, schism, and revival) seems to have done little to advance itself past the original marks set down by those originary figures. This is in part because in the later development of this literature has become (at least to anthropological eyes) “primarily classificatory and highly scholastic” (Robbins 2012b:204), but that is not the only sin. To a large degree the currently dominant “rational choice” variants of denomination and church sect theory (e.g., Finke and Stark 2006) are so soaked in metaphors and logics taken from an essentialization of free-market forces that despite attempts to deploy it in other times and locales (Stark 1997), it comes across as so parochially American that it appears to be a good that has no export-market value (see also Handman 2014).

But perhaps to anthropological eyes this literature’s greatest horror is not the presumptions that animate its most current

iterations but rather the narrow range of possibilities it imagines from the start. This literature depicts denominationalism as at base an endless compulsive cycle starting with small coveways of breakaway sectarian purists at war with both a church they oppose and a society in which they are ensconced. Then, over generations they grow in size, station, and influence until they reach a stage of senescence, becoming yet just another iteration of the full-scale, society-endorsing church that was originally rejected. Finally, they become in turn the target of a new group of schismatics. This model of interlocking stages inexorably following one another is effectively a unilinear social evolutionary logic. Comprising a teleological sequence, this is a staged, hierarchical model reminiscent of other linear anthropological schemes such as those of Henry Lewis Morgan (1907) and Edward Tylor (1877), modes of thought that anthropology as a discipline has soundly rejected. It is this unilinear logic that makes going through this denominational literature feel like reading about the life cycle of some strange microfauna or archaic creature that starts out as a parasite only to itself become parasite ridden in turn by its own young when it reaches its bloated terminal stage.¹ Stripped down to its core elements, this becomes a story as unlikely as it is unbearable, at least to a nominalist-leaning anthropology: church history as incurable repetition compulsion, as a complete foreclosure of anything truly new.

Incurable, but perhaps not unending. The only “solace” in this literature is the possibility that at least in the United States, the age of denominations (what we might call, after the Holocene or the Anthropocene, the “denominocene”—or perhaps, after the Mesozoic, the “denominozoic”?) is now at its

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1. It should be noted that at least under some variations of sect church theory, in a contemporary age where the church has no more control than the sect, the sect instead turns its *ressentiment* against society itself (Robbins 2012b:204; Wilson 1982).

end, and the denomination itself is on the cusp of extinction. Since the Second World War, the American denominational form has been racked by a plague of ills. For example, denominational adherents are effectively no longer regionally concentrated and are thus diluting their power; there is a decreasing resistance to marrying outside of denominations, and switching one's alliances to a new denomination is now common; and there has been a leveling in social status between different denominations as educational levels rise across the board. All this has had institutional effects on the porousness of denominational boundaries and the state of the denominational fisc: congregations are increasingly making use of extradenominational curricula and accepting clergy trained in interdenominational seminaries, while many denominations have undergone substantial losses both financially and demographically. Perhaps most importantly, denominations are often no longer seen as a moral good in and of themselves (Richey 2010:90–94; Wuthnow 1988:71–99). Even those who now champion the denomination as being analytically useful, socially pertinent, and ethically defensible admit that the health of the denominational form, and possibly even its survival, is an open question (Richey 2005, 2010; Roozen and Nieman 2005*a*, 2005*b*).

This contrasts sharply with the profile that the denomination has cut in the anthropology of Christianity. Here the case seems to be the inverse of the one found in sociology, with denominations active as both a force on the ground and as an analytic category. This vibrancy is perhaps not unsurprisingly mirrored by what appears to be a lack of any sort of consensus or overarching narrative as to how denominations unfold over time. Single denominational bodies are pictured with their constituent churches differing greatly from one another (Engelke 2007; Howell 2008). They are also alternately shown as cohering across considerable geographic and social distances because of their “transposable message” (Csordas 2001 [1997]) and their ability to take the shape of a “part culture” with “worldviews meant for export” (Coleman 2006, 2010:800). As opposed to the vision of denominations as having a great deal of inner variation, this is a vision of the denomination as an entity closely sutured together by circulating set discourses, literatures, and forms (Bielo 2009:135–154; Keller 2005; O'Neill 2010:170–197).

This is not the only aporia seen in the “anthropological” denomination. Denominations are depicted as readily splintering into different and to some degree dialectically opposed movements; these movements often substantially vary from one another in ideational content and practice (Bielo 2011*a*, 2011*b*; Handman 2012; Meyer 1999). Alternately they are shown as not producing difference but constraining it, encouraging a convergence of beliefs and practices between various religious movements in a given locale (Jebens 2011; McDougall 2012). The question of denominational ties to entities that we might want to demarcate as “political” is also open: they either openly endorse a politicized sense of the nation (O'Neill 2010; Tomlinson 2012), or, in lieu of the state, they

directly engage in the work of governance itself (Eriksen 2012), or they sanctimoniously (in the original sense of the term) keep a distance from both governance and the political (Bialecki 2009*a*, 2009*b*, 2009*c*; Robbins 2012*a*, 2012*b*). Most striking is that while no anthropologist directly takes this up, all these possibilities seem to lie next to each other as vying simultaneous paths rather than as distinct segments in a well-ordered teleology.

No doubt that some of the variation within anthropological accounts of the denominational form are simply matters of perspective and emphasis, and while many of these anthropological accounts keep an eye on history, the snapshot-like rendering that ethnography often conveys probably torques the field more toward the seemingly disordered and stochastic. Finally, these differences might be speculatively tied to the fact that the anthropological-denominational literature tends to be reports about either convert cultures in places such as New Guinea, Africa, and Latin America, where these forms of Christianity have only been relatively recently introduced, or the ethnographic cases involving long-Christianized spaces, such as Anglophone North America, or the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe and Eurasia, which usually focus on the most conservative and most resurgent religiosities. Whether discussing sites where Christianity is novel or where it is returning (albeit in a new form) with a vengeance, these are both situations where we might presume that the force of religious invention has temporarily upended whatever homeostasis might have preexisted; in short, these are places where, present appearance aside, a sociological-denominational logic might yet be ordering things over the duration, if we were to wait out the intervening chaos. Still, the anthropological account of the denomination is a dizzyingly diverse view of the capacities and forms that these movements can take as well as of the way in which they can be combinatorially articulated with other entities—including not just other denominations but also the state. There seems to be no easy way to reconcile this vibrant anthropological view of the denomination with the grey, narrow, and doomed form that is the sociological denomination.

Here, though, we argue that not only are the anthropological and sociological denominations capable of being reconciled but that the way to do so is to not reject the most theoretically problematic aspect of the “sociological” theory of denomination but rather to embrace it. This allows us to see a hidden vibrancy, enabling us both to explain the wealth of denominational forms focused on by anthropologists and to look at the accounts of denominations charted by sociologists with new eyes, allowing these works to be read with a sensibility that reimagines them without undoing them. All this is done not through the rejection of that concept most distasteful to anthropological sensibilities—social evolution—but rather through embracing it. After tracing out what sort of evolution might allow us to fully intuit denominational diversity and transformation, in this essay I will take the history of a single “denomination,” a charismatic movement

called “The Vineyard” that originated in Southern California, to show what that collectivity looks like viewed from the stance of anthropological-denominational natural history rather than sociological theory.

Evolution of a Value and the Value of Evolution

It is in the first moments of H. Richard Niebuhr’s *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1957), the urtext of American sociological accounts of denominations, where we find our key. Before he even begins his work of simultaneously identifying and lamenting how changing sociological class maps onto shifting denominational form, in the opening passages of the book Niebuhr concedes that there will inevitably be a certain incompleteness in any moment of Christianity.

It has often been pointed out that no ideal can be incorporated without the loss of some of its ideal character. When liberty gains a constitution, liberty is compromised; when fraternity elects officers, fraternity yields some of the ideal qualities of brotherhood to the necessities of government. And the gospel of Christ is especially subject to this sacrifice of characteristics in the interest of organic embodiment; for the very essence of Christianity lies in the tension which it presupposes or creates between worlds of nature and spirit, and in its resolution of that conflict by means of justifying faith. . . . Organize its ethics—as organize them you must whenever two or three are gathered in the name of Christ—and the free spirit of forgiving love becomes a new law, requiring interpretation, commentary, and all the machinery of justice—just the sort of impersonal relationship which the gospel denies and combats. Place this society in the world, demanding that it be not of the world, and strenuous as may be its efforts to transcend or to sublimate the mundane life, it will yet be unable to escape all traits of conspiracy and connivance with the worldly interest it despises. Yet on the other hand, Christian ethics will not permit a world-fleeing asceticism which seeks purity at the cost of service. At the end, if not the beginning, of every effort to incorporate Christianity there is, therefore, a compromise. (Niebuhr 1957:4–5)

Niebuhr goes on to state that the inevitability of compromise “does not make it less an evil” (Niebuhr 1957:5), but it is not his normative evaluations that is of interest here. Rather, it is the almost Derridean hypothesis that any pure form has an excess that escapes any particular instantiation of it (see Jennings 2005). But just as important as the idea that Christianity cannot ever be “fully” realized is the sense of this unrealizability as a continuing problem, one that endures and that must always be grappled with anew as circumstances change. The challenge of how to be Christian may not always be foregrounded, but it never goes away.

This idea of a problem is an important one. This sense of revisiting a difficulty that never is identical to a previous in-

stance and yet cannot be seen as a break from earlier iterations of it either has recently been sketched by Matthew Tomlinson (2014) as central to a Kierkegaardian-informed temporal logic of repetition identifiable in many ethnographies of Christian collectivities. This play of a continual break that yet harkens back to a still-insisting problematic means that at some level, we could grasp these instances of repetition as moments of open potentiality, of various ways forward that rise up and are delineated by the “event” of the juxtaposition of both the problematic and the circumstances that it is realized in (Bialecki 2012).

While this *événement*-centric take might be the best way in the abstract to think about this phenomenon, the particular circumstances in which we are taking this up, that of the denomination as an enduring and self-re-creating institutional form, means that we have to further narrow what it is that we are addressing. We should keep in mind that though there may be pluriform potentialities in any particular instance, not all of them will be viable in the sense that when taken up “by” a social form, they will not necessarily result in the continuation of the social movement; many will be ephemeral, or extra- or anti-institutional gestures, sometimes even moments of religious self-erasure (Bialecki, forthcoming; King 2013; Nancy 2008), that will bubble around and within denominational movements but will in effect be just religious “Brownian motion.” Only those realized open potentialities that either continue, expand, accelerate, retard, or redirect the unfolding of a denominational movement will be pertinent. In short, we have to consider the fact that of all the open potentialities that are actualized, it is only those that result in some self-continuing capacity, some autopoiesis, that will be of interest to us here (Faubion 2011:5–8, 86).

Normally, autopoiesis would turn us to systems theory (see Luhmann 2013), but there are reasons why this might not be the best way to get at the problem at hand. Our interest is not in a single field—religion as a bounded, communicative social system—but rather specific, copresent, and often vying social entities. Furthermore, we are dealing with differently scaled and constituted entities: not only do we have to consider the autopoiesis of denominations but also the joint autopoiesis of individual religious subjects and even (where it is applicable) the autopoiesis of Christianity as an immanent and historically positioned abstraction (Bloch 2012; Simondon 1992). Furthermore, if the anthropological accounts of denominative forms has any lesson for us, it is that the different denominations, religious subjects, and cultural abstractions that are associated with each other will often (but not always) be realizing themselves in ways that also can be sharply contrasted with one another.

Here we get to an important point. Vying, transforming, competing, autopoiesis, continuation: whatever else this language might be, it is also the vocabulary and logic of evolution. Not the rejected unilinear evolution implicit in the denominational form as given to us by sociologists, in which the single problem of a tension between purity and accommo-

dition always results in the same answer, the sect doomed to be a church. Rather, this is evolution as a parallel working through of a core set of problems, with different responses opening up different horizons where these problems can be further worked through in ways that yield even more fully developed answers. But at the same time this is an evolution where an original impetus is driving the process, a small set of problems and material that is historically before any later instantiation but that still subsists in these latter forms. It is therefore a conception of evolution where the changes are seen as much in different degrees of emphasis and development as they are in teleological changes of form.

But that does not mean that there are not some resonances with the earlier evolutionary model found in “sociological” denomination theory. Biological evolution is in effect “digital,” dealing in quanta of single reproductive entities (even if these entities count most when functioning as agglomerations).² By way of contrast, the evolution being discussed here cannot be reduced to demarcated subsuming entities; the denomination is as much a species as it is a single reproductive unit.³ Rather, this is an evolution predicated on the continual transformations of what we might want to simultaneously stabilize as singular entities and yet also put into motion, thinking of them as identifiable though occasionally dividing strands that are always “in flux” or at least has flux as an available mode. But if we take up both the idea of continuation, not as stasis but as trackable difference, and also adopt the idea of denominationalism as parallel but not identically situated solutions that are working through a problematic, then we have to notice that one element of the “sociological” model does not fit. We cannot have a “new” denomination, as that would be in essence a break in continuity; we would have to view schism as just that, a bifurcation in the denomination where under the exigent force of the moment, two different and mutually incompatible solutions are simultaneously taken up; different forks in the same stream. Neither denomination is the “new” body or for that matter the “old” body either; it is just that sometimes only one of the branches will hold on to a previously existing moniker. To this extent, all “denominations” are coeval, both in the sense of being

contemporaneous but in being equally old as well.⁴ It is this turn, more than any other, that is obscured by the sociological account of the denomination; it is also the turn that does the most to hide the continuing vibrancy not just in new movements but in all movements taken as a whole.

How old, then, might these movements be? The term “denomination” dates back to the seventeenth century, when dissenting churches presented themselves as recognizable bodies that could still be loyal to the state and king despite their rejection of the established church (Richey 2010:94). However, a schismatic tendency appears to exist throughout the history of Christianity, reaching at least back to the Donatists if not all the way to first-century proto-Christianity. Indeed, it is arguable that the original Christian work of identifying heresy is nothing other than a reaction formation to a constitutive richness in Christian thought that always threatens to become difference (Barber 2011).

There does seem to be a certain change at roughly the Reformation, though. The difference is not the presence or absence of variation before that point but rather the fact that outside of Protestantism, there are different capacities in pre-denominational forms that attempt to constrain differentiation even while allocating it a real or metaphysical space. An example can be seen by way of contrasting denominational Protestantism with Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism (even if it is a somewhat abstract and schematic comparison with a degree of intellectual violence). Orthodoxy, concerned with a mesh rather than a disjunct between state and church, is characterized by differentiations that result from specific and localized alignments with political systems. An identity of rites among Orthodoxy works obscure the internal, local differentiation that occurs through the proliferation of at least notionally equal centers organized by territorial logics; difference is controlled through being distributed spatially (See Binns 2002; Boylston 2013; under this scheme attempts at instituting uniformity in a territory can beget accelerated differentiation at the territorial edge; Humphrey 2014). Roman Catholicism handles differentiation in an inverse way. It proliferates difference not through a multiplicity of centers but by way of multiplications of organizations and rites that all are at least fictively beholden to a single center, though usually with each differentiated strand having different oversight, responsibilities, and entitlements in regard to that center; in this scheme, the opportunity of direct, lateral opposition against other forms of Catholic internal difference is muted, though by no means erased. Catholicism, therefore, is metastatic, differentiating *within* its territory; Orthodoxy is colonizing, multiplying difference *among* territories.

Protestantism, on the other hand, has a different relation-

4. It should be acknowledged that there are times, though, where either the degree of change, the amount of extraneous internalized material, or both so distend the problematic that it essentially becomes a different problematic; it is also possible to consciously or unconsciously adopt some other problematic as a result of internalizing extraneous material (Hoskins 2014).

2. More technically, in evolution there are different temporal scales and processes that mean that reproduction is punctual even, contrasted with separate, though not autonomous, moments of organism development and ecological interactions (Weiss and Buchanan 2009).

3. We should note that just because we have differently scaled items, and even items (such as Christian adherents) that in part constitute larger-scale items, we should not take a reductionist turn and “undermine” (Harman 2011) the denominational form. Just because we can identify units that might be subsidiary to and yet partially independent of larger units, that does not mean that the larger units can be thought of as merely aggregations of the smaller units; this kind of nominalist thought only erases the additional ideational, material, and praxeological aspects of the denomination that may in combination have emergent properties.

ship with territory/space and authority; while it has had moments where it has assumed both by way of becoming a state church, it has also shown its ability to present itself as a remnant (Handman 2014), as a social body beholden not to a specific territorial expanse (cf. Bandak 2014 and Schieffelin 2014) or with the entirety of a population definable in terms autonomous from religious belonging.⁵ Rather, the denomination only takes up those who elect to adhere to it, wherever they may be situated (though there are real-world constraints on this virtual openness). It is the concept of the remnant that allows a simultaneous exercise of authority (in putting forward a truth claim that is almost always an exclusive one) and an abrogation of it (to the degree that the logic of remnant encourages a self-sequestering from, or antipathy toward, other religious and political organizations).

Now on one hand, this process may be thought of in a rather conventional manner as a part of the work of secularization, with secularization understood here as a disarticulation of previous “total social facts” into now distinguishable strands, though this is not to say that this de-cohesion occurs in the same manner or leaves the same residual by-products in every place that this process has occurred (Asad 2003; Casanova 1994). But this is also a process capable of being read through a particular figure-ground inversion, where this is not properly Protestantism having lost the levers of state but rather Protestantism having cast them aside to gain the capacity to better control difference not by territorializing or institutionalizing it but by affirming it in all its autopoietically viable possibilities, fully embracing the inevitable centrifugal force that comes with a religiosity capable of multiple and often mutually irreconcilable realizations.

Two questions arise. First, what is it that allows for there to be such divergent forms of Christianity, not only between major families of the order, such as Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Protestantism, but also, with Protestantism, between the various Protestant genera and species? Second, what (if anything) is specific to these religious forms as opposed to other nonreligious, self-replicating, and occasionally mutagenic autopoietic institutions? The answer to both lies in a thread running through most variations of religion, however differently they may be individually constituted. As Webb Keane (1997) has noted, religion has as a shared problematic: the difficulty of communication with “invisible interlocutors,” a problem that is made more acute by the fact that there is no

5. The concept of the remnant used here is also not unconnected to its use by Agamben (2005), though the vision of the remnant that Agamben finds in Saint Paul more properly identifies an always decreasing but never exhausted sliver of potentiality that precludes any totalization rather than the actualized entities that we are discussing here, which are nothing but that this potentiality be constantly exercised. In an effort to preclude objection, we should state that it is the Protestant deterritorialization that gives rise to some of the territorializations that at times flood into and relocalize space, albeit in ways that sets space in relation to abstract universalisms (Bielo 2011a, 2011c, 2013; Jorgenson 2005; O’Neill 2010; Robbins 2012b).

“single set of formal or pragmatic features” that might universally be taken as a sign of successful interactions with these invisible agent(s) (48–49). As such, even though it is stabilized by ideational material and practices, religion is very much always underdetermined; this means not only are there a plurality of possible positions that could be taken up as a response to this challenge but also that there is little cost internal to the coherence of the system in shifting one’s take on this problem. There may be other external costs at the level of a larger social or political collectivity that might be imposed as a response to taking up some possible branching solution to this religious problem. But, as opposed to other endeavors that are centered on objects that, because of their inescapable materiality, may offer more resistance and demand more fixity, religion is always capable in theory of taking up some other way forward. Unconstrained by any single necessary semimaterial form, it enjoys more freedom to vary than other social institutions, and it also enjoys a freedom for its branches to extend themselves farther in the development of answers to an original problematic.

What would the path of one of these branches look like? If the original impetus matters as much as both the circumstances it is embedded in and the solution that it presents, then we would expect to see not only continuity in the denominational movement but also a degree of “specialization,” of carrying out to more and more rarefied degrees of potentialities that were already present in a virtual manner. We can see one example of what this particularizing action would look like by turning again to Webb Keane, this time to what he has labeled “Protestant Semiotic Ideology” (Keane 2007; see also Bialecki and Hoenes del Pinal 2011; Robbins 2001). In this case, Keane’s work charts a tendency found across various forms of Protestantism, but carried out to an extreme in Calvinism, to increasingly obscure and deny aspects of religious language that cannot be classed as sincere, spontaneous, and effectively immaterial. Keane calls this the work of “purification,” and he sees it as increasing in intensity in Calvinism (and Calvinism’s daughter—social movements) over time, slowly approaching but asymptotically never reaching some state in which the rejected aspects of speech would be entirely absent. While Keane’s work is meant as a contribution to the prehistory of modernity and secularism, what it does for us here is show what evolutionary development along a single line might look like.

Now, this argument for historical continuity may seem like a backdoor essentialism, a sort of social-science laundering of apostolic succession. The cure for this is again to borrow from biology. It would be mad to claim that denominations engage in the same kind of sexual reproduction as a great many biological entities do; but like biological entities (specifically, bacteria) that exchange plasmids with one another, the “lateral” or “horizontal” exchange of practices and concepts among denominations and between denominations and other social entities can work to similar effect as sexual reproduction. There may even be moments where there is no

much lateral exchange that all we can vouch for is *some* sort of continuity, albeit it in radically reshuffled ways. This may especially be the case where we have “evolutionary bottlenecks,” that is, small collectivities or even individuals who are alone in their being the whole of a denominational form; here, the autopoiesis and development of a single individual would be the complete autopoiesis and development of the denominational form as well, allowing for even more accelerated combinatory transformations (e.g., Engelke 2005; Faubion 2001).

We should note that not all of these transfers will result in the adoption of those new practices and concepts. The differentiating work done by variations in emphasis and form, which function collectively as parallel solutions to the same problem, may be accelerated by what are in essence auto-immune responses to laterally conveyed material. In these cases, laterally transferred material would be antithetical enough to existing arrangements and direction in a movement that it rejects them; this rejection of one possibility means in essence an overall acceleration along a different path tangential to the path that would be opened up by that incorporated yet rejected material. Mutual inimical exchange between two movements in proximity to one another would create complementary schismogenesis (Bateson 1935, 1958).

Even in spaces where “exchanges” with the environment do not work to this effect, we should note that the various capacities of various branches will differentially be affected by the modes and degrees of resistance that they encounter in their environment. In some spaces, denominations will not have to “fight” to realize themselves, and in others they will encounter bitter resistance and will have to accord themselves appropriately. Again, one of the largest variables will be the explicit or implicit set of relations or nonrelations with the state. The state may serve simultaneously as an empowering and a retarding factor, slowing some parts of the differential process while accelerating others. We should also note that some forms may be so successful in a given milieu that they will outperform other claimant differentiations, effectively arresting the process of differentiation, though not necessarily the process of the intensification of certain branches/solutions as they come to numerically dominate a social space (see, e.g., Robbins 2009).

There is one more important point to make. This is an analytic that privileges change. This is offered as an attempt to intuit what is occurring in the social processes being discussed, and it should not be taken up as necessarily a normative or a political judgment (Friedman 2002). Change and transformation in the abstract is not a good in and of itself, and it may at times be the engine of de-coherence. Nor again is this a denial of stasis, of moments where the “movement” of transformative or mutagenic evolution is not occurring; much like there are biological entities at the level of species that undergo little change, there may be social forms that are seemingly quiescent, in “metastable states” (Simodon 1992), not being pushed at that moment to change in one way or

another even if such a change of form is possible at the level of potential. What should be accounted for in those instances, though, is what are the forces that are retarding or counter-acting potential movement.

This point regarding differing intensities and forms of resistance, of variations between stasis and movement, is important because it allows us to pivot back to the issue that we started with. The purpose of putting this system forward is to allow us to intuit both the efflorescence of denominations as captured in the anthropological record and the paucity of difference in the American one. In each case, not only are we dealing with different modes of realization of different potentialities from the initiating problematic, but there are different forces acting differently on the denominational movements as well. This is evolution’s first lesson: different forms for different ecologies. In this sense, the sociological denomination has been treated far too harshly here: it has a real but historically bounded and now threatened object. Extinctions do not make paleontology any less of a science.

There is another aspect that is important to note. Just because the denomination is waning in the United States does not mean that the forces of differentiation are waning as well. This model not only allows us to grasp comparatively the “denominozoic,” but it also allows us to understand the era on the far side of the American denominational equivalent of the Cretaceous-Paleogene extinction event, too. Furthermore, it allows us to understand it not as an end of the forces expressed in denominationalism but as an *intensification*. In moments where the resistance is not enough to decelerate either the branching and differentiating work that gives rise to denominations or to preclude an effectively unrestricted level of lateral transfer, what results is not the segmented form of separate denominations but rather a smooth expanse where the “raw material” (churches, believers, concepts, and praxes) in the “plane” of the social is subject to constant transformation (Lury, Parisi, and Terranova 2012).⁶ Streams differentiate and recombine at such a pace that they are blurred. Here, rather than having separate potentialities shoot out like spikes or paths, they are more like overlapping fans with interference patterns, in effect a direct mapping of *potentia* to realizations. With the borders of the denomination less salient and sometimes being absent entirely because of the pressures of differentiation and the flattening effect of accelerated borrowing, the forces of differentiation that would normally work under intradenominational cover are both exposed and unconstrained. The end of denominations, then, is actually that mark of denominationalism in excess of the capacity of denominations to bear it.

6. This tendency, which Lury, Parisi, and Terranova 2012 refer to as an emergent “topological” rationality, is explained as being in part the result of contemporary forms of mediation that stress their accelerated speed and immanent nature. This suggests that space-time compression may be playing a vital role in bringing this about (Harvey 1990).

The “Natural History” of a “Denomination” after the Denominozoic

This line of thought obviously has a kinship with the anthropology of social and religious movements, particularly revitalization movements (Wallace 1956), and the posttypological accounts of religious movements developed during the 1970s (Fabian 1979; Fernandez 1978). The specifics of this model, though, come from someplace else. While a familiarity with the work is not by any means necessary to grasp the version of evolution presented above, and similar elements can also be seen in such diverse projects as those of the critic Michel Serres (1997) and the biologist Stuart Kauffman (2000), this specific model was taken almost whole cloth from the vision of biological evolution presented by Henri Bergson (1911).⁷ Bergson’s theory, not necessarily at odds with Darwin’s but certainly not resonant with neo-Darwinism either, is actually a better fit for our purposes for all the reasons that it now seems inapplicable as a template for understanding actual biological evolution. While it is true that the coding of language is in some abstract way similar to the coding of DNA (Delanda 2006:14–15), Bergson’s choice of variations of a core problematic as the engine of reproduction and change instead of numerous disparate genes seems a better fit for the case at hand; similarly, his use of a continuing stream of differentiating germ cells (rather than discrete individuals) as the privileged unit of analysis fits well (at least metaphorically) with denominations as transformational enduring projects. These choices allows Bergson to talk about a range of emphasized identifiable traits in particular organisms as an expression of an impetus and problematic; for instance, animal and plant life is strewn along a field with the attractor of “motion” on one hand and “stillness” on the other; animal life itself has its own bipolar field, with intelligence and instinct as the attractors that structure that field.

These are attractors, creating ranges of solutions, that may work well when discussing biological evolution writ large, but it would strain the metaphor too far to expect the same operation to be working out in the differential evolution of denominations. There is another framework, though. While not explicitly taking up the “branching” model of entities that informed *Creative Evolution* (1911), Bergson latter presented a possibly more apposite set of attractors in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1935). Much like the instinct/intelligence biological opposition (which he explicitly evokes), he suggests that morality and religion are suspended between two poles, an identitarian ethos organized around the protection and continuation of sharply delineated and closed sociocultural groups, and a mystically infused ethos that

7. The one exception is the lateral transfer of concepts, material, praxes, and people, which was borrowed loosely from Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) discussion of the cross-species transfer of genetic material. It should also be noted that use of Bergson’s theory does not necessitate the adoption of Bergson’s vitalism; emergent effects can be seen as the result of combinatory possibility instead (De Landa 2011).

works toward an “open” society, a universalism indifferent to the divisive categorization of human belonging.

The language used to frame these categories is openly normative, however, and it is not immediately clear how they would be operationalized as engines of differentiation in an evolutionary-minded account of the development of denominational movements.⁸ Furthermore, it is uncertain how these operations could be accorded with the current American religious landscape, a state of denominationalism in excess of denominations. We are in need of an exemplar to help us think this through concretely. For this I turn to the history of the Vineyard, a Southern California–originated but now worldwide church-planting movement that emphasizes the use of contemporary forms of music for worship and that also is known for stressing Pentecostal-style spiritual practices such as prophecy, speaking in tongues, healing, and hearing directly from God. Consisting of over 590 churches in the United States alone (Higgins 2012:208), this ongoing combination of strongly charismatic religious practices, an informal culture, and use of popular music has influenced theologically conservative churches throughout America in the past 20 years, resulting in what has been referred to as the “Californianization” of American Evangelicalism (Shibley 1996) or, even more extravagantly, a “second reformation” resulting in a new, experientially centered Protestantism (Miller 1997).

The Vineyard may be a movement, but it is not a denomination; the proper name for its governing body is merely the Association of Vineyard Churches. The word “association” suggests a kind of voluntarism, a sense ratified by the limited capacity of this governing body. As pointed out by Donald Miller (2005), the Association of Vineyard Churches “does not ordain . . . it doesn’t own property . . . it doesn’t have paid bishops . . . it doesn’t have a centralized pension plan . . . and there is no centralized health insurance” (161). Indeed, the Vineyard explicitly rejected a 1987 drive by its then-leader to become a denomination. This was in part due to a dream that the leader’s wife had, which was interpreted as a message from the Holy Spirit to not go down the denominational road, but also in large part due to resistance to the move by Vineyard pastors (Jackson 1999:169–179; Miller 2005:146–147).

Despite its nondenominational status, though, it is considered to be equivalent enough to a denomination to be covered in a book assessing the current health of denominationalism in America (Roozen and Nieman 2005a). As a nondenominational “denomination,” then, it is a fitting object of a “natural history” of how it and other predecessor and successor

8. That said, it should be noted that individual charismatic praxis is shot through by recurrent polar tendencies of dilations and contractions, open and closed selves, centripetal and centrifugal language, all of which is resonant with, though not assimilable to, Bergson’s claim regarding open and closed religion; see Bialecki (2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2011).

movements have differentiated themselves (and often done so at an accelerating pace).

One indication of this intensification is the fact that one does not have to go too far in the past to find the predecessor movements, and once the Vineyard is established successor movements arrive with very little reprieve. The Vineyard was founded as a small group of Christian musicians who were convened in a Los Angeles living room by Kenn Gullikson in 1973. It quickly spread, with another weekly meeting being held in another Los Angeles house belonging to Larry Norman, an incredibly influential musician in the world of Christian hippy rock (Eskridge 2013:222–228; Higgins 2012:212; Stowe 2011). Additional Christian figures from the Los Angeles entertainment industry (including for a brief period Pat Boone) hosted Gullikson-led Bible studies and home churches until in 1975 Gullikson decided that he wanted to consolidate these into a single church, which met over the next few years at locales such as the Beverly Hills Women's Club and life-guard station number 15 on the Will Rogers State Beach in Santa Monica. In 1975, this traveling group was finally incorporated as the Vineyard Christian Fellowship of Beverly Hills and had grown to 11 churches by 1982 (Higgins 2012: 212, 225).

We can view this early Vineyard as both a continuing intensification of previously existing tendencies and also as the development of new traits. Before founding the Vineyard, Gullikson had been ordained as a pastor in 1971 by Calvary Chapel, an Orange County Jesus People church (Balmer and Todd 1994; Harding and Stewart 2003). Gullikson afterward brought along several people from Calvary Chapel when he came to the Vineyard. The inheritance from Calvary Chapel includes the heightened use of popular musical styles and an attempt to produce an "informal" atmosphere where the sartorial codes and language ideologies were more resonant with those found in the "non-Christian" practices common in the social classes of young adults that most of their members were drawn from. These embryonic Calvary Chapel practices, and particularly the importance and use of music, were carried out to almost exquisite degrees in the early Vineyard (it was no accident that this was the church that Bob Dylan was associated with during his dalliance with Christianity in the 1970s and 80s; Stowe 2011:214–215).

There were, however, important differences as well. Pentecostal-style charismatic phenomena was given a greater role; unlike Calvary Chapel, which isolated such practices in post-service "afterglow" ceremonies, at the Vineyard they were allowed to occur during main meeting times. Additionally, these charismatic practices were openly relied on in making leadership decisions about the directions at the church and congregational level. Finally, there was a blending of home church services and at-home Bible studies with the main church services, something that did not occur at Calvary Chapel (Higgins 2012).⁹

9. It is worth noting that the early Vineyard was not the only offshoot

At the same time that the Vineyard was expanding and developing in this direction, Calvary Chapel was intensifying the sometimes unspoken, sometimes quite explicit restrictions on charismatic practices (Smith 1992). In 1982, internal tensions on this issue within Calvary Chapel triggered a lateral transmission between the two groups; John Wimber, a Fuller Seminary trained and employed church growth specialist was encouraged by both Calvary Chapel leadership and Kenn Gullikson to transfer Wimber's Calvary Chapel associated church to the Vineyard (Higgins 2012:220–221; Jackson 1999:77–87). Wimber had been encouraged by C. Peter Wagner, his supervisor and friend at the Fuller Seminary School of World Missions, to experiment with forms of charismatic practice (particularly healing) that were in their shared opinion driving church growth in the global south; it was this interest in charismatic phenomena that led to a reallocation both between and within those organizations.

Viewed from a vantage point of differential evolution, though, this appears to be an acceleration of the differentiating tendencies between these two groups. By joint decision between Wimber and Gullikson, Wimber became the leader of the Vineyard soon after joining it. Under Wimber, many of the previously existing tendencies, such as an informal attitude and a foregrounding of the importance of contemporary music as a form of worship, continued. Charismatic practice, however, was increasingly more common and played even more of a role in leadership decisions than it did under Gullikson, causing what appeared to be sudden lurches in the Vineyard's direction, particularly when it came to what spiritual gifts it would be emphasizing. Prophecy, for instance, had a brief but disruptive centrality in the Vineyard, where the capacity of self-appointed figures to speak with authority outside of any clear organizational control or accountability lead to increasingly unstable intrarelations within the movement (Jackson 1999:167–231). There were other important transformations as well. The rate of church planting accelerated. This was in part due to scalar issues; Wimber brought nearly thirty other "spirit-filled" Calvary Chapel congregations with him (Jackson 1999:84). But it was also due to an increased amount of technical knowledge regarding church-planting techniques that Wimber disseminated throughout the Vineyard.

This led to one other transformation, the hypertrophy of the "conference" as a regular form of collectivity at a scale

of Calvary Chapel to play with the domestic (in the form of the home church service) and the idea of a communal religiosity that exceeds the familial; another significant branching was the Shiloh Youth Revival Center, which took an already extant tendency in the wider Jesus People movement to constrain and totalize the community through Book of Acts-inspired communal living and made that the center of their religious project; this movement grew to almost a thousand members scattered across 25 states until tax problems arising from the use of communal labor in for-profit enterprises triggered both a crisis in leadership and a fatal bankruptcy (Eskridge 2013:98–100, 257–260; Richardson, Stewart, and Simmonds 1979).

above that of the home/group Bible study and church. While conferences are a common practice in Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity (Coleman 2000), the Vineyard increasingly relied on them as a way of instructing its increasingly large membership not only on necessary church management and planting material but also on new body techniques of inculcating “Spirit-filled” practices. Because these charismatic practices are highly dependent on experiential aspects (Csordas 1994; Luhrmann 2004, 2012), they had to be literally practiced at these meetings, leading to these gatherings frequently being marked by highly intense affective events. During Wimber’s leadership, the Vineyard acquired a reputation for these conferences, and it was common for them to also be attended by individuals unaffiliated with the Vineyard. While Wimber was a frequent and often foregrounded presence during these conferences, it is important to note that they were a collective endeavor and that a whole generation of Vineyard prayer leaders, pastors, and authors were both produced and presented through and by way of these conferences.

These movement-defining conferences are important because they are one of the points of the next bifurcation. In 1994, a Vineyard church in Toronto, Canada, experienced an upsurge of charismatic activity during a small conference that Wimber did not attend. Impressed by this reaction, this conference was extended on a day-by-day and then a week-by-week basis. Eventually it became an effectively perpetual running conference called the Toronto Blessing, and other Vineyard believers as well as other charismatics began to attend in significant numbers, forming a sort of charismatic pilgrimage. Space does not allow for a full discussion of what these rather intense and seemingly also highly contagious charismatic experiences were like (see Bialecki 2010a; Jackson 1999; Poloma 2003), but certain aspects of this rolling conference, such as getting “drunk in the Spirit,” fits of “holy laughter,” and the Spirit-filled mimesis of animals (most commonly, but not always, lions) spread rapidly both within and without the Vineyard. Despite an initial endorsement by Wimber, this never-ending conference/revival/church was eventually asked to disaffiliate with the Vineyard; this rejection did not slow down this movement at all, and it eventually became the hub of an autonomous church network called “Partners in Harvest.”

This again can be seen as a differentiation, with the Toronto Blessing intensifying the sense of conference in lieu of church and an acceleration of pace of production of novel charismatic phenomena (e.g., after it parted from the Vineyard, participants in the Toronto Blessing reported gold dust appearing unbidden from the ceiling, as well as dental fillings being transformed into gold). Toronto itself has since bifurcated several times. Nor has the Vineyard been still. Over the years, the Vineyard has increasingly become associated with a very gentle antimodernism; this can be traced in its transition from a church that once hosted Hal Lindsey (Higgins 2012:214) to becoming a movement with little space for the antimodernist

modernism of premillennial dispensationalism (Harding 2001:228–236) and increasingly laterally incorporating ritual practice and aesthetics (if not theology) from avowedly self-conscious “postmodern” forms of Evangelicalism (Bialecki 2009c:179–197; Bielo 2011a, 2011b).

Charisma₁, Charisma₂, and Conclusion

Looked at as a totality, this could be seen as the story of the Vineyard taking certain ecstatic musical and spiritual practices from the 1960s Jesus People movement and intensifying their direction. At some bifurcations, the Vineyard chose the hypercharismatic route, while at other moments “breakaway” groups took some of these Vineyard traits and organizational structure and allowed them to become hypertrophied. Even the changes in the size of the group, both in terms of churches and members, can be seen as intensifications to the degree that changes in rate of growth and breadth of form are not just numerical increases but qualitative transformations in character and capacity (Thompson 1942).

Just as noteworthy as the nature of this differentiation and development, though, is its rapidity. As this sketch shows, even this one stream, in a course of 30 or so years, has reduplicated, bifurcated, and mutated at such a rate that the reifying work of recognition and organization as a traditional denomination cannot keep pace; rather than dealing with generational change, we are seeing several waves of mutagenic transformations occurring during the life of a single believer. We also see that despite whatever value Bergson’s opposition between openness and closure may or may not have as a general rubric, transformations here are shifts in numerous autonomous axes or registers and are often more about accelerations or intensifications in practice than they are about a shifting sense of ethics: degrees of intimacy, intensity of charismatic practices, speeds in the production of charismatic gifts. These axes, we should finally note, cut across numerous strata, indifferent to whether they are touching on the cultural or the social, the signifying or the material.

But the above sketch also brings us face to face with another issue that we have been skirting all along: Weber’s account of charisma. As this history indicates, particular individuals (Gullikson, Wimber) seem to have an outsized profile in these movements; a more complete narrative would be replete with even more singular names of authoritative figures. It is tempting to see Weber’s account of charisma (what we might call “charisma₁”) as having a role in the type of Pentecostal/charismatic religiosity (“charisma₂”) that we have been speaking about here. But to do so would be to turn our backs on all that we have put forward in this essay.

Weber’s theory of charisma is in essence just another presentation of the kind of unilinear social evolution that anthropological denominationalism has forced us to reject. For Weber, charismatic authority is always temporary, a way station for a generation or two until less supple modes of traditional authority or bureaucratic rationality are reestablished.

This is again the logic of the breakaway sect turned into sclerotic church, though with an emphasis on singular anti-nomian figures empowered by their capacity to capture lightning in a bottle. Therefore, the presence of figures such as Wimber and Gullikson makes Weber's account, and thus the sociological denomination, seem all the more convincing. There are of course ways of seeing charisma as a collaborative process, a joint project of the leader and followers (Csordas 2001 [1997]). But this merely decentralizes and systematizes charisma and does not undo its implicit temporal direction.

Three things need to be kept in mind if we are not to let Weber's account throttle the model here. The first is to remember that those other forms of postcharismatic transformation, the supposed death of charisma, can also be figured as hypertrophies, hypotrophies, and shifts of emphasis and intensity as well. Indeed, even the arresting of change itself can be seen as a change in the rate of change. Regimentation, it turns out, is change as well. The second is the observation that at least in Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity, there is no shortage of charismatic leaders, and hence at least in some moments the singular leader breaking with the norm is yet another norm as well. But finally, we must note that even if we grant Weber's claim, charismatic leaders, in breaking with form and history, are still the prisoners of form and history; the ability to reorder and reorientate is to presume previous orders and orientations that must be taken into account, and hence they determine the paths forward. This is to say that even before these singular leaders, there was already generic potentiality. And rather than fixate on fleeting specificities, we should attend rather to the forms of these rapidly arising virtualities that rush out ahead of the religious movements that actualize them if we are to be able to produce a natural history for the current period, the age that occurs after the denominozoic.

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