

# How Do Religions End?

## Theorizing Religious Traditions from the Point of View of How They Disappear

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What does it mean for a new religion to arise or take hold among a group of people? What does it mean for a religious tradition to endure? These are questions that are quite commonly addressed, at least implicitly, in the study of religion. Less frequently asked is the question of what it means for a religious tradition to come to an end. This article addresses this question, paying particular attention to the ways people actively dismantle a religious tradition that previously shaped their lives. I also consider what studying the process of religious disappearance can teach us about what it means for a tradition to arise and endure, arguing that a grasp on processes of religious dissolution is necessary for a fully rounded approach to the study of religious change. Throughout the article, I illustrate my arguments with material from the study of Christianity, Judaism and indigenous religious traditions, particularly from Oceania.

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This article is focused on one aspect of the phenomenon of religious change – that part of processes of change that involves the dissolution or complete disappearance of older religious traditions when they are replaced by newer ones. We do not have a robust sociocultural anthropology of the disappearance of institutions and cultural phenomena in general or of the disappearance of religious phenomena in particular. In part this follows from the fact that in cultural anthropology it has not been common until quite recently for scholars to focus on the topic of radical cultural or religious change in any of its aspects. As the social science disciplines began to take shape in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, anthropology was handed not only the study of ‘primitives’ or ‘others’ as its bailiwick, but also the study of such objects as cultures and traditions. And cultures and traditions are generally defined by their tendency to endure through time. Historians might study change, and sociologists, devoted as they have been to understanding the nature and rise of modernity, might do so as well. But anthropologists focused on the study of culture studied objects marked by their tendency to persist. With such enduring subject matter in view, it should come



as no surprise that many sophisticated anthropological theories, such as functionalism, structuralism and practice theory, all helped explain why patterns of culture and social life usually reproduced themselves through time. For this reason, cultural anthropology, and especially the wing that studies religion, has largely been what I have sometimes called a science of continuity, and it has been a field not much concerned with how it is that things disappear (Robbins 2003, 2007).<sup>1</sup>

It is only in the last fifteen years or so that a strong interest in radical change has developed among anthropologists of religion. An important impetus for this development has come from the emerging movement in anthropology to adopt Christianity, once a taboo topic, as a legitimate object of study (see Meyer 1998; Robbins 2003, 2007; Keane 2007 for early statements on Christianity and change). I could say more about why it is that the study of Christianity, and Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity in particular, has fostered a turn towards the study of cultural change. But for the purposes of this article, I want to leave that task aside and instead point out one peculiarity of this new-found interest in religious change that I had not noticed until I began to think about the subject of how discarded religious traditions come to pass from the scene. Looking back on almost all the recent anthropological work on religious change, it is hard to miss that it has focused on the rise of Christianity in formerly non-Christian communities, or on the rise of new kinds of Christianity in places where people formerly practised other kinds (for example, the widely studied turn from Catholicism to charismatic Christianity in Latin America). Very little of this work, in fact none that I know of, has attended primarily to the decline or *disappearance* of the religious traditions that conversion serves to displace. To be sure, any account of the rise of something new has to understand the advent of its object of study against a background of what is transformed or left behind. But most treatments of conversion define the processes that attend the disappearance of what is left behind as issues of residual interest. The theoretical emphasis has all been on understanding how the new comes about and takes hold, how discontinuity can appear in cultural formations, and very little energy has been directed to asking how the old loses its grip on people's hearts and minds and eventually fades away. What I want to do here is explore some questions that follow from shifting our attention squarely on to the traditions that lose their hold and ask how it is that they sometimes come to disappear.

I should say at the outset that this is a frankly experimental article. It is meant to map out what for me at least is a novel area of focus, more than to settle the matter of what we should do once we enter that terrain. And it is an article that invites response, since I can only even begin to consider the issue of how religions fall from an anthropological point of view, and I am sure there are further resources in anthropology, as well as in religious studies and other disciplines, that can add much to my discussion. I should also say that I am going to be more focused here on what we might be able to say about *how* things disappear – about the process of disappearing – than on explaining *why* they do so. I will not be able to refrain from making some causal conjectures along the way that might explain the particular cases I am considering, but they will be eclectic in spirit. It is around the issues of process that I will try to be a bit more systematic.

This article unfolds in three parts. The first and longest takes up a case of a society-wide conversion from an indigenous religion to charismatic Christianity amongst a

group of people in Papua New Guinea. I have explored this case in detail before, but always from the point of view of how Christianity became entrenched in the community concerned. Here, I want to re-examine the history of this conversion process from the point of view of the indigenous religion that was left behind, looking at how it was dismantled. The second section looks at a very different kind of religious disappearance. I have been studying global Pentecostalism (by which I mean both Pentecostal and charismatic forms of Christianity) for almost two decades now. One thing I have noticed is that this religion is particularly susceptible to the emergence of trends that quickly diffuse around the world and appear to dominate religious life in many places for a brief period, but then just as quickly find themselves displaced by new trends that put them in the shade. Although I am not yet in a position to lay out in detail the processes by which one trend replaces another in Pentecostalism, I want to suggest that this pattern of trend formation and dissolution makes this religion a potentially rich focus of study for those interested in the fall of religious complexes and the topic of religious change more generally. In a final, concluding section, I want to return to the question of religious continuity, and consider how we might want to reconceptualize continuity as a problem for research in light of the foregoing examination of religious collapse. I have provided this brief roadmap at the outset because in terms of their empirical content, the three sections of the article are disparate, but I hope laying them out all at once in summary form indicates how I intend them to cohere at the level of theoretical concern. With that map in mind, let me begin.

## **On Christian Conversion and the Disappearance of an Indigenous Religion**

In the early 1990s, I carried out extensive fieldwork among the Urapmin, a group of 390 people living in the West Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea (PNG). Scholars sometimes divide the more than 700 language groups of PNG into those whose members devote much of their attention to large-scale ceremonial exchanges of pigs and other valuables and those who dedicate a similarly great amount of time and energy to the performance of religious rites. The Urapmin traditionally fit comfortably into the latter category. At the centre of their concerns was the practice of an elaborate men's cult that served to turn boys into strong warriors, to prosper the subsistence crops the Urapmin grow in their swidden gardens, and to ensure success in hunting. The most spectacular part of the cult was a series of four major initiation rituals or 'steps' (*ban*), each lasting many days or weeks, that boys went through sequentially from when they were roughly six years old through their late teens and early twenties, at which point they began to climb a ladder that had them leading more and more of the rituals for younger men. Surrounding the rituals that constituted the major initiatory steps of the men's cult was a whole host of more minor rituals that fed into the performance of the initiations and achieved related goals. As is evident in studies of neighbouring groups carried out when their related ritual complexes were still active, male ritual concerns were salient throughout many of the contexts of daily life among groups of the region, including the Urapmin (Barth 1975; Gardner 1981; Jorgensen 1981).

Although only men practised the initiation rituals, which were kept secret from women, and although only the oldest men knew in any detail the secret knowledge that provided the rituals with their cosmological rationale, the Urapmin ritual system organized the lives of everyone, male and female, young and old. This was so in part because much of the productive activity that everyone carried out ultimately supported the performance of the rituals, which required a good deal of surplus foodstuffs to bring off. But everyone's life was shaped even more fully by the ritual system's elaborate set of taboos that structured all quotidian activities. These taboos were given by the creator woman Afek, who also gave the Urapmin the ritual system itself. She declared that the taboos had to be followed precisely lest people fall ill and endanger the success of the rituals.

When one considers both the profound importance of the ritual system and the constant relevance of Afek's taboos in all areas of activity, it is clear how completely what the Urapmin now call their 'ancestral religion' (lit. *alowal imi kukup*, the ways of the ancestors) shaped the ways they led their lives. Yet as the Urapmin tell it, fairly soon after their contact with Westerners, this ancestral religion was completely gone, and nothing I saw during my two years of fieldwork during the early 1990s contradicted this view. In its place was a sophisticated charismatic form of Christianity, to which all Urapmin had converted during the course of a Holy Spirit revival brought to the community in 1977 by local people who had learned of it while studying in a bush Bible college run by a man from a neighbouring community.

I have told the story of how Christianity took hold among the Urapmin in detail elsewhere (Robbins 2004). It is a story that involves the Australian colonization of the region in which the Urapmin lived in the late 1940s; the coming of Australian Baptist missionaries to work among neighbouring groups living six hours' arduous walk to the East and West of Urapmin during the 1950s; the Urapmin sending their young people out to study with the missionaries during the early 1960s, a course of action that usually led to the conversion of these students; the return of these converted young people to teach their parents and siblings the outlines of the Christian faith without converting them during the mid 1960s to the 1970s; and finally the coming of the revival in 1977, when many people felt themselves 'kicked' by the Holy Spirit – an experience that convinced both those who had it and those who watched others have it that God was real and that they were sinful people who needed to convert to Christianity.

As the revival gathered steam throughout 1977 and more and more people converted, one determined young man demanded that his elders put him quickly through all the stages of initiation he had not yet undergone. Only after being fully initiated, he insisted, would he accept the Christian faith. His elders acceded to his wishes and then, after he passed through a rushed version of the final initiation stage, he walked into the church the Urapmin had by then built and declared, 'we are all Christian now'. Urapmin has since seen itself as a completely Christian community in which the ancestral religion has no role to play.

The Urapmin tell the story of their conversion to Christianity in quite common charismatic Christian terms as an experience of the advent of something completely new in their lives. It is Christianity's newness, its absolute difference from their traditional religion, that stands out to them. When I discuss Urapmin conversion and

attempt to draw theoretical lessons about religious change from their experience of it, I follow them in focusing on the newness of Christianity and argue that, in converting, the Urapmin have been able to take on a new cultural system in something like one piece, learning to see the world in Christian terms rather than through a syncretic mix of these terms with traditional ones. Because they adopted Christianity in such a holistic form, I have further argued that we should see the Urapmin adoption of Christianity as grounded in a shift in their most important values. The kind of religious change they have experienced is not a matter of picking up a few bits and pieces of a foreign system of thought and practice, say a ritual here and a fragment of belief there. It is rather a shift in what one defines as most important to accomplish in life and in the relatively coherent set of beliefs and actions by which one tries to realize one's new goals (see Robbins 2004, 2009). If my purpose here were to *explain* the fall of traditional religion, I would do so on the basis of an argument related to this analysis: Urapmin traditional religion, I would claim, ultimately disappeared because the Urapmin no longer saw the realization of its goals as their paramount concern. Yet such an argument would tell us very little about *how* Urapmin religion fell – it would not instruct us in the way people can sometimes take a religion apart and throw away the pieces. It is the processes that attended the dismantling of Urapmin religion that I will focus on here, rather than the adoption of the new values that led the Urapmin to want to carry out this act of destruction.

Perhaps an analogy will help more clearly to specify my analytic intentions here. Several years ago, I reviewed a long grant that proposed to study the process by which huge container and cruise ships are taken apart. As it happens, this is not an easy job. It requires a great deal of specialized machinery and produces tons of scrap metal and other kinds of waste that need to be dealt with. In fact, it is so complicated to get rid of a large ship that there are only a few places in the world where this is done. Although it is the construction of new ships that ultimately makes people ready to destroy old ones, it does not help you much in studying the destruction of old ships to know how new ships are built or for what purposes people want to build them. A thorough study of ship destruction requires instead a steady focus on the relatively unique techniques used to take them apart. I similarly want to study the processes by which traditional Urapmin religion was dismantled and then discarded.

The material I will use is primarily ethnohistorical, gleaned from interviews with Urapmin about their past. As such, my account reflects what the Urapmin themselves see as important steps in the fall of their ancestral religion. In analysing their accounts, I have found that they highlight three different processes that were crucial. The first of these involved what I see as a recognition of the growing social difficulty of ancestral religious practice, a phenomenon that preceded the revival. The second I gloss as the material erasure of ancestral religion, which was particularly to the fore during the revival itself. And the third, which likely started even before the revival, but which also gathered steam during and after it, I analyse as the replacement and displacement of the concepts and practices of the ancestral religion by those of Christianity. Taken together, these three processes give a rounded picture of how it is that traditional religion came to an end in Urapmin.

Let me begin then with the growing social difficulty of practising traditional religion. I am referring here to problems the Urapmin began to have in performing the initiation rituals that followed from the fact that various kinds of necessary participants were unwilling or unable to participate as their lives became more and more tied up in the changes wrought by the coming of colonialism and missionization. The most important category of participants to withdraw from the initiations was the young men for whose benefit the rites were in part performed. By the late 1960s, many of the young men who had converted at the mission schools they attended among neighbouring groups refused to participate in the later stages of initiation, defending their decision by asserting that God would be angry at them should they take part. I have counted at least fourteen young men who opted out of initiation in this way – a major part of the cohort that would have been ready for the upper level initiations at that time. Along with these men who openly refused initiation, we also have to count among the missing those who during this same late 1960s era left Urapmin for two-year stints working on plantations in distant parts of Papua New Guinea, as well as those who left to serve as native evangelists to even more remote groups. These men, too, were not available to participate (Robbins 2004: 112–115). The problem of an exodus of the young from the initiation system in Urapmin was almost certainly greatly exacerbated in those neighbouring groups in which the missionaries were active and ran schools and in which travel to plantations had started earlier. Since the Urapmin rituals were part of a region-wide ritual system in which all groups had to participate in order to assure success, the beginnings of the collapse of traditional religious life in these more rapidly Christianizing communities added to people's sense that it was becoming more and more difficult socially to operate their traditional religion.

It is perhaps not surprising that it was precisely this period of growing social complication that saw the first important conversions of Urapmin who had not gone to mission schools. Two rising leaders, men on their way to playing important roles both in the traditional ritual system and in social life more generally, converted at this time. It is important to realize, however, that this period of social complication arose before such conversion was widespread. Conversion was still mostly a move made only by younger men who had been sent to live at the mission schools. These two leaders were early adopters of Christianity among those who stayed at home. The social complications that beset traditional religion thus mostly expressed themselves before Christianity had really begun to replace it in Urapmin. They began the process of weakening the structures of traditional religion, but their impact on it was somewhat limited by the absence of a mass turn to a new religion.

The mass turn would only come with the revival in 1977. When one talks to Urapmin about the revival, one of the strongest themes across the accounts they give is that of what I am calling the material erasure of the traditional religion, the second process I will focus on. By material erasure I mean the careful, frequently almost ritualized, abandonment of the material supports of traditional religious practice. This was, by all accounts, a process that unfolded very rapidly after the revival began. Led by some of the oldest of the men who had studied at the mission schools, those who converted moved to burn the magical and religious objects, including the bones of near ancestors, that they kept in their homes, or to throw them down the mostly unused pit

toilets the colonial government had made them dig. With this move, apparently very thorough, the more private aspects of traditional religion were set aside. Even more dramatically, two of the rising Christian leaders undertook to remove the bones of the major ancestors from the central cult houses in which they were kept hanging from the walls in ancient string bags dirty with the smoke of many burnt offerings. From this perch, the ancestors had overseen the initiations and received the sacrifices made during them. Those who removed the string bags containing the ancestral bones had no doubts about the continued power of the ancestors to which they belonged. They lifted the bags off the walls of the cult house with long sticks and carried them held out far from their own bodies. And unlike more minor sacra, these bags and the bones they contained were not burned or thrown down toilet holes. Instead they were taken to the forest and put in the hollows of trees with areal roots, or placed in caves that gave them shelter. They were thus removed from the village but not put in great danger of the kind of immediate decay that would render them beyond recovery.

Urapmin describe this period of material erasure as one of a careful testing of the strength of the Christian God: would he be strong enough to accomplish what the ancestors formerly accomplished, and would he be able to hold back the ancestors now bent on vengeance for how the Urapmin were disrespecting them? People planted gardens and prayed over them, rather than performing initiations and burying magical objects or ancestral sacra in the ground along with shoots of the tubers they cultivated. They prayed for the growth of boys and watched carefully to see if their development would be stunted. And they prayed before hunting to see if God would also help them bag game. Only when the gardens grew as usual, hunting did not begin to fail, and boys continued to mature did people decide to abandon the ancestors permanently to the forest where they had brought them, their bones left to rot away. Although the process of erasing the material existence of the ancestors had been at first a rather cautious one, the Urapmin came to describe it in retrospect in somewhat violent tones that reflect its perceived power and finality. During the revival, they now say, 'we threw the ancestors out.'

With the ancestral bones gone, the men's cult houses in which they once resided fell into disrepair and collapsed. Not only had the houses lost their ritual function, but men no longer needed to sleep in them, since as Christians they no longer followed the traditional taboos that separated men and women in so many contexts of daily life. Men began to sleep with their wives and children in the women's houses. So, too, did the separate paths for men and women lose their role in Urapmin life, as people started to maintain only one broad track on which everyone could walk between the villages that make up the community. If my goal was to explain conversion, I would also stress how this period of the material erasure of traditional religion and its bones, houses and paths was at the same time one that saw the development of a Christian material world. It was during this period that first one and then two churches were built, that people learned to put up crosses on the walls of their houses and to bury them in their gardens, and that many people began to carry copies of the New Testament with them in their string bags when they were out and about. But since my primary focus is on the fall of traditional Urapmin religion, I am more concerned to leave you with the picture of a landscape increasingly barren of the material features that once supported its practice.

In some ways, the Urapmin represent this process of material erasure, particularly of the ancestral bones, as a decisive moment in the decline of their traditional religion. I once asked a group of people if they thought the Urapmin would ever return to that religion. I expected them to say no, and to explain their answer by asserting the strength of their devotion to the Christian God. But this was not quite how they answered my question. They did indeed say they would never turn back, but the reason for this was that such a return would be impossible to accomplish. 'After how we treated the ancestors,' they asserted, 'they would never take us back.' Material erasure in this reckoning is also decisive spiritual insult, and this is surely what gives it such a prominent place in Urapmin accounts of how their traditional religion came to fall.<sup>2</sup>

The third aspect of the decline of traditional Urapmin religion that I want to highlight is one focused not on material change but rather on transformations in religious understandings and the practices they underwrite. There were, of course, very many such conceptual and practical changes involved in the conversion of the Urapmin, but my focus here is only on those that directly shaped the fate of traditional religion. They did so by way of two closely related processes I will call respectively the Christian replacement and the Christian displacement of elements of tradition. Replacement refers to those cases in which Christian understandings and practices substitute for traditional ones but aim to realize the same goals. Displacement, by contrast, covers those cases in which Christian practices do not simply substitute for traditional ones, but more than this take an explicit position on the need to reject their goals.

Let me start with replacement, and offer as an example one of the most obvious cases of it in the history of the fall of Urapmin traditional religion. This is people's use of prayer to entreat God to help them succeed in many of the tasks for which the ancestors once provided assistance. I should note immediately that the Urapmin do not see God as primarily a replacement for the ancestors in this way, and they do not see the main point of Christianity as the provision of the kinds of help they used to seek from the ancestors. The point of Christianity, as they see it, is the salvation of each Urapmin person, and much of their vigorous prayer life both aims at this outcome and lays out in detail the theological assumptions that provide its foundation (Robbins 2004). But it is also true that charismatic prayer is open-ended, without much in the way of normatively fixed text, and as such it can take up any concerns believers want to express through it. Taking full advantage of this flexible quality of charismatic prayer, Urapmin pray for success in many quotidian contexts such as gardening, hunting and the staging of more or less complex social events, and when they do so they ask God to provide precisely the kind of help the ancestors once provided. We saw a hint of this practical use of prayer in my discussion of material erasure during the revival when I noted that Urapmin prayed that their gardens and their young men would both grow, and that hunting would go well, and then checked to see if their prayers had led to the desired outcomes. As in these early tests, in many contexts Christian prayer has replaced traditional ritual practice while aiming to reach the same goals the older rites once achieved. From the point of view of the dying traditional religion, this ability of charismatic forms of prayer to adapt themselves so easily to traditional aims served to further diminish the chances of traditional ritual finding niches for their continued survival.



Displacement is a slightly more complex process than replacement, though its outcome is similar. In displacement, aspects of Christian thought and practice do not simply slot in where traditional thought and practice had once been but rather provide a clear rationale for why former practices and the goals they set need to be abandoned. One straightforward example is the way Urapmin will now tell you that they have come to realize that Afek and their other important ancestors really existed, but they were simply normal human beings, not supernaturally powerful figures that deserve ritual attention. These ancestors lived after the time of 'Adam and Eve and Noah,' people say, and they lied when they said that they themselves had created the Urapmin. In this new narrative, the ancestors are not wholly replaced, but they are displaced out of their once central position in Urapmin history and relegated to much more marginal roles in which they deserve no veneration.

A much more complex case of displacement is that of the way the Urapmin understand Christian law to have displaced their traditional system of taboos. Urapmin refer to both 'law' and 'taboo' by the same term (*awem*). As they now understand matters, the taboo system put in place by Afek is false. God, they say, created everything and wants everyone to use the things He has made. Now is, as they put it, 'free time' – a time without traditional taboos. But the present is not completely without rules. The myriad traditional taboos now seen as offering a false model of right behaviour aimed at ensuring health and success in subsistence endeavours have been replaced by a strict Christian moral code that helps people realize the new goal of Christian salvation. As the Urapmin see it, one kind of law has pushed another aside. Now, as they put it, is the time of 'Christian law' (as well as 'government law', but that is another story, for which there is no space here). Just as Afek has been displaced from the centre of Urapmin history, so too has the system of cultural norms she established been displaced – discredited not only for getting the content of the law wrong, but also for setting goals that are themselves less important than they were made out to be.

I have endeavoured in this section to lay out some of the processes by which Urapmin religion crumbled and was cast aside. I have argued that its dissolution began with the growing social difficulty of performing traditional rituals, gathered steam through processes of material erasure and then was further completed by the replacement and displacement of traditional religious ideas and practices. One outcome of my experiment in thinking from the point of view of the fall of a dying religion, rather than from that of the rise of a growing one, has been to reveal the importance of these processes in Urapmin history. It remains an open empirical question whether these or similar processes are also at work in other instances of religious decline.

## **On Pentecostal Trends**

As an area of study, questions of religious decline and disappearance should not be limited to asking about how entire traditions like the one I have called Urapmin traditional religion come to an end. There are certainly other, more limited forms of religious fall that also deserve attention. With this point in mind, I want now to shift gear somewhat abruptly to look briefly at a perhaps less dramatic, or at least less decisive, kind of religious rise and fall: the kind we might see as the coming and going

of trends in religious thought and practice. By trend, I mean here new kinds of thought and practice that do not wholly transform existing traditions – in Christian contexts, for example, people do not usually experience the adoption of a trend as a conversion – but which people pick up quite rapidly and generally dispose of with equal dispatch when a new one arrives. All religions are probably marked by the rise and fall of trends. But I have lately been struck by how powerful the process of trend formation and replacement is in global Pentecostalism today. In the Pentecostal milieu, trends not only develop quickly, but they diffuse globally with blinding speed, such that as soon as we identify one in Africa, we also see it in Southern California and in Latin America, and so on. I want to ask here what the advent and passing of such trends might be able to teach us about our focal topic: the nature of religious decline.

The kinds of Pentecostal trends I want to discuss occur at all levels of religious life, from reorientations in people's understandings of some of their religious goals to more minor fads in ritual practice. I am going to concentrate primarily on changes in religious goals, although I think the diffusion and decay of Pentecostal ritual innovations is also a topic ripe for study.

If one looks at the social scientific literature on global Pentecostalism from the late 1960s to the present, it is hard not to see, starting in the 1990s, a trend-like shift in the expression of this religion in the global South, going from what Ruth Marshall (2009) calls a 'holiness' emphasis on ascetic moral self-control, aimed at achieving salvation in the afterlife, to a 'prosperity' emphasis on tithing and petitionary prayer, aimed at achieving not only salvation in the future but also health and wealth in this life. In a movement as large as Pentecostalism – to which the latest figures attribute 600 million adherents – the shift from an emphasis on holiness to one on prosperity has not been complete. One still finds many holiness-oriented Pentecostals throughout the global South (the Urapmin would, for example, fit this description). Yet until very recently it appeared that the fastest growing forms of Pentecostalism in the contemporary world were clearly those that emphasized earthly prosperity, and that many believers who formerly embraced ascetic forms had adopted this new emphasis. More recently, scholars have started to report another transformation. This one sets aside the prosperity emphasis on the success of church members and puts in its place an intense focus on the salvation of the nation (Eriksen 2009; O'Neill 2010). The kinds of deliverance rites that once aimed to rid people of demonic influences that prevented them from becoming healthy and rich are now deployed for the benefit of the nation. Salvation in these churches has suddenly come to look a bit more like a collective than a solely individual process, an orientation to ultimate Christian goals that is as foreign to the holiness strands of Pentecostalism as it is to tenets of the prosperity churches.

One can imagine all kinds of explanations for these trends. For example, the change from the holiness to the prosperity emphasis might follow a well-known pattern of world-rejecting sects transforming into world-accommodating churches as their members climb the social class ladder. Explanations of this kind have been used to explain the succession that has led from classical Pentecostalism to the charismatic movement and then to the Pentecostal third wave in the United States, a series of developments that has had some influence on the global trends we are considering. Another argument accounting for the shift to an emphasis on national salvation might

be that, while members of both the holiness and the prosperity movements seem to have rejected the state in favour of wider global identifications – with the global Christian community in the holiness case and the global market in the prosperity one – the recent move towards a focus on national salvation reflects people's increasing sense that in the post-cold war period the world beyond the nation has become too chaotic to hold much promise. In the contemporary world, people thus find themselves thrown back on their national identifications as they attempt to secure desirable earthly, world-accommodating futures for themselves, and this identification with the nation in turn renders its salvation a matter of urgent concern.

My point in calling attention to these broad trends in Pentecostalism is less to explain why they have come about, however, than to point out that they provide us with examples of another kind of religious rise and fall. Holiness types of Pentecostalism that once looked so dominant have in many cases faded in the face of the growing popularity of prosperity churches, which are themselves giving way to versions of the faith centred on national salvation. We do not, as far as I know, yet have the material to examine the processes by which old trends fade as new ones arrive. I cannot for this reason analyse the fall of these Pentecostal trends in the same detail as the collapse of traditional Urapmin religion. Yet we do have hints about some of the processes involved – for example, in material on the networks that connect Pentecostal leaders around the world, networks built up through a constant round of conferences, visiting pastoral appearances and the circulation of media produced by so many Pentecostal churches today (Coleman 2000). These networks allow new ideas to spread quickly, putting previous trends in constant danger of losing their grip on the pastors who once promoted them. And the ease of starting new churches within the highly schismatic Pentecostal tradition ensures that such new ideas have little difficulty in establishing institutional homes for themselves once they catch on. But these few thoughts are not enough to build a whole analysis around. To move forward, we would need research on how Pentecostals give up on their old beliefs and practices in favour of the new, and how, like the Urapmin, they put their older concerns definitively out of play. All I want to point out here is that students of the dynamics of religious disappearance will find a useful set of possible case studies in the rapidly changing world of global Pentecostalism. Like organisms that reproduce rapidly and thus serve to provide biologists with copious data on the course of evolutionary change, Pentecostalism can provide almost a model system for those of us interested in the rise and fall of religious traditions.

## **Conclusion: Revisiting Religious Continuity**

I have been looking so far at issues of religious change and discontinuity from the point of view of how religious traditions and trends disappear. Rather than conclude by simply summing up what I have said about the nature of religious dissolution, I want to return briefly to a problem I set aside at the outset – that of religious continuity. As far as much anthropology of religion is concerned, continuity is the null hypothesis: it does not need to be explained, but can instead be simply assumed. Religions persist because that is what they do. Their doctrines and rituals and systems of authority and education, amongst other features, are all designed to ensure that they will endure.

When anthropologists encounter religions in the field, they can study them as they find them. There is no burden on these scholars to explain how they have managed to survive. Having failed to study religious discontinuity and disappearance systematically, many of us have also failed to problematize religious continuity in a way that would have made it an attractive object for study.

One work I know of that makes an excellent start on this project is not by an anthropologist, but rather by a scholar of Jewish Studies. In his book *Surviving Sacrilege: Cultural Persistence in Jewish Antiquity*, Steven Weitzman (2005) studies what he calls 'the arts of cultural persistence' that allowed the Jews to foster the continuity of their religious traditions from the period between the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BC and the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. More than this, Weitzman also suggests that these arts have helped the Jewish religion to survive until today. His goal in studying religious persistence is to challenge 'the view that associates the effort to preserve tradition with inertia, a lack of exertion, or change' and to show that 'the commitment to preserve Jewish religious tradition, far from retarding creativity, actually excited a considerable amount of it' (Weitzman 2005: 11). Persistence, in Weitzman's view, is a social project – it is something people actively do, rather than something that simply happens.

In keeping with this emphasis on the creativity of Jewish projects of persistence, Weitzman discusses a long list of techniques Jews have used to keep their traditions alive. These range from allying with the enemy to rebelling against it, from encouraging your overlords to value your Temple as a work of great art worthy of preservation to misleading them into believing that there is nothing inside the Temple worth seeing or stealing.

Among the many examples of the arts of persistence that Weitzman discusses, two are particularly interesting in the context of the present argument for the ways they might be taken to have protected the Jewish religion from feeling the full effects of the processes of material erasure and displacement that were so influential in the fall of Urapmin religion. The destructions of the First and Second Temples certainly count as major instances of material erasure. But as Weitzman shows, at least in the case of the destruction of the First Temple, Jews actively promoted stories suggesting that key sacred objects had survived and might even be returned. More than this, they also creatively developed ideas about how the Temple might be rebuilt from tiny fragments, or reconstituted without any original materials if only the form could be reproduced, or even how the Temple could be reimagined as a matter of the organization of a community, rather than a feature of its built environment. It was these sorts of stories and ideas, Weitzman suggests, that helped keep the spirit of the Jewish religion alive even as its followers lost control of its material supports.

Weitzman also makes much of the Jewish reflexive awareness of the issue of persistence. In some respects, all of the Jewish techniques of persistence take shape under the canopy of the value Judaism self-consciously places on its own continuity. Stories of survival of the kind Weitzman mines for his data all promote this value, making persistence a meaningful project for generation after generation of Jewish people. I want to suggest that this kind of thematization of persistence provides a strong defence against the corrosive power of displacement by new religious traditions, even

when they are backed by stronger social powers. It allows people to find meaning in sheltering a guttering flame, and turns marginality into a source of the creative energy that Weitzman documents. Put perhaps too simply, his work teaches us that religions that make their own persistence an important value are likely to fare relatively better than those that do not when new religions move to push them aside.

With its highly foregrounded interest in persistence, Judaism is an excellent case to use in promoting the importance of studying religious continuity as a project. But I point to it here only to raise the issue of continuity as a much more general concern. To create valuable theories of religious change, we are going to need to account both for why religions sometimes die out and why in many cases they do not. We will have to find ways of comprehending major shifts like the one that occurred when the Urapmin converted, and the less holistic kinds of change constituted by the trends that wash over global Pentecostalism. And we will have to learn to account for continuity as well, not just assume it.

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## Notes

1. I realize that the claim that cultural anthropology has been largely a science of continuity is one that is open to a good deal of debate. I have tried to defend it in some detail in the earlier articles I have just cited in the text. To the points I have made in that earlier work, I would add that I have in mind particularly the kind of cultural anthropology that has long been important in the study of religion. There are of course a range of traditions in political-economic anthropology, for example, that focus on political and economic change but much of this work is not concerned with radical change in the religious sphere.
2. I might point out here one aspect of what happened during the revival that scholars of other parts of PNG have seen as very important to the demise of traditional religion, but that the Urapmin do not play up in their own accounts (e.g., Tuzin 1997). This is the revelation of men's cult secrets, and particularly the secret ritual objects of the cult, to women and children. Some such revelations happened during the revival, but as Urapmin see it, the most important secrets were not the hidden objects that were revealed, but rather the cosmological knowledge that determined how and explained why the ritual system worked. Urapmin assume the oldest, most knowledgeable men never did reveal their most important secrets of this kind, and so the process of revelation does not figure as decisive in their accounts in the way material erasure does.

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# Comments and Reply

## What if a Religion Is Not Made to Last?

*Aparecida Vilaça, Museu Nacional/Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil*

Once again Robbins astounds us with his creativity, combined with his own unique clarity and simplicity, in tackling a seldom explored topic: how does a religion disappear?

Every cultural transformation involves a mixture of continuity and discontinuity, and like most anthropologists who study religious change, my focus in studying the conversion of the Wari' to Evangelical Christianity has been on examining in detail how these two aspects are constituted and interrelated (Vilaça 2009, 2011, 2013).

The case of the Wari' and other indigenous Amazonian groups is particularly interesting in terms of exploring how a religion 'disappears'. Unlike the Jewish people mentioned by Robbins in the final section of his article, the Wari' were never concerned with the 'persistence' of their 'religion' – taken here to refer to their own cosmological universe, involving a particular notion of humanity and personhood, as well as specific rites, especially those related to shamanism. On the contrary, they always had a keen interest in outsiders – their practices, rituals, clothes, gestures, objects and words – something that was observed among Amerindian peoples generally by the first Jesuits to disembark in Brazil in the sixteenth century, and an aspect still present in contemporary ethnographic accounts (Vilaça and Wright 2009).

For the Wari', their former religion always caused them a host of problems, since the fact that animals were human made the Wari' themselves potential prey. This, in turn, demanded all kinds of precautions, including observance of food taboos. Animals could not be upset without risking the possibility of being turned into one of them. Shamans worked as mediators in this tense relationship, negotiating with animals for them to release the doubles of attacked or abducted people, as well as teaching the Wari' to recognize and avoid the dangers. Unlike the Urapmin, they did not practise any kind of initiation rite, nor was there any religious materiality per se. No objects, nor even a demiurge. The Wari', as they themselves said, just existed without ever having been created.

When Christianity arrived, the Wari' became enchanted with the missionaries' powers, especially their capacity to cure. They soon also became interested in their God, responsible – the missionaries said – for the efficacy of the medicines. But what most interested them was Genesis and the de-subjectification of animals implied in



the creation of humans as the leaders and masters of the natural world. Wishing to share the divine perspective of creation, they strove to become God's children through prayers and close observance of the new rules.

This was not the first time that the Wari' had experienced a conversion based on the adoption of an outsider's perspective. One narrative of their ancestors (what we might call 'myth') recounts that it was an adopted enemy child who taught them how to see the world correctly, specifically in terms of how animals should be classified. Only at this moment did the paca become a paca, the tapir a tapir, and so on. Another mythic narrative tells that it was after being abducted by an enemy group that a Wari' girl learnt from them much of what today is central to Wari' life, such as preparing their main everyday and ritual drink, maize chicha, and their funeral chant.

Indeed, the Amazonian ethnological literature shows that this pattern of capture of identificatory emblems, such as adornments, songs, names and rites, from the exterior is a widespread trait, leading two well-known authors, Viveiros de Castro (2011) and Carneiro da Cunha (2009), to conclude that in Amazonia culture is immediately acculturation. Unlike some other groups, the Wari' do not try to forget the context of capture: just the opposite, they emphasize it, forever marking the foreign origin of new practices and thereby enhancing their value. This does not mean that such practices are adopted irrespective of their efficacy. As among the Urapmin, the abandonment of food taboos was carefully tested. However, this is not seen as a path of no return, since the possibility of oscillating between two distinct systems – in relational, moral and even ontological terms – is not alien to them. Christianity itself brought animal agency back through the notion of the devil, a perfect trickster leading them to the world of metamorphosis and extended humanity.

In this context, then, how should we conceptualize the end of a religion or, alternatively, the agency involved in its 'persistence'? While the Wari' traditional religion may be seen to be disappearing, this process involves less the abandonment of a religious system and more a switch between relational universes. In the world created by God, in which the Wari' increasingly look to immerse themselves, animals are no longer human if the Wari' can benefit from the divine powers against the devil, which depends on their efforts to become kin with God. Animal agency does not disappear: it becomes eclipsed. Likewise, shamans can resume their role as mediators: this happened in the 1980s and 1990s following the collective abandonment of Christianity after more than a decade of intense experience, which had also involved the abandonment of traditional ritual life and the adoption of new practices like praying, church services, confession and baptism.

What is new this time are the economic changes, which, along with school education, further introduce new conceptions of the innate world, humankind and personhood, in parallel with Christianity itself. The Wari' case differs from the Urapmin who had nowhere to return after mistreating their ancestors. Rather, having ceased to practise their rituals and shamanism for almost fifteen years, an entire generation has grown up without observing these rites and without hearing the myths that gave them meaning. Moreover, the older generation of people who became adults before the first contacts with white people at the end of the 1950s, and who transmitted this knowledge to young people, are now dying out. What is involved, therefore, is a comprehensive



shift in the relational context, inevitably leading to a change in religious practices and conceptions. In addition, we should not forget that, for the Wari, their religion was not made to last. This seems to me to be the key to the question.

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## The Sense of an Ending

*Simon Coleman, University of Toronto*

There is an art to asking apparently simple questions that require complex – and productive – answers, and Joel Robbins' article demonstrates this art with some aplomb. 'How Do Religions End?' is ingenious – not only because it asks the 'how' rather than the more obvious 'why' question, but also because it requires us to examine what is meant by the very idea of the 'end' of a religion. What are the signs of dissolution, and how do we recognize disappearance when we see it? How do we trace the deconstruction of the old alongside (and sometimes as part of) the construction of the new? As Robbins implies, these questions have the capacity to encourage anthropologists to ask novel questions about the character of religious absence as well as presence; in addition, they

might prompt us to re-examine data that we have already gathered; but they probably also point to areas of fieldwork to which we have not yet paid enough attention.

Robbins directs our attention to the demise of religions, but he seems less interested in the petering out of traditions and rather more in their active dismantling, embodied most strikingly in the Urapmin determination to embrace Christianity. Cultural strategy, rather than apathy, is put into analytical play here in thinking about disappearance. Given such a focus, there are aspects of Robbins's argument that could be brought out even more. Active dismantling, after all, requires an equally energetic and sometimes quite precise identification of that which needs to be removed. But is it necessarily easy to know which aspects of a tradition are to be targeted? Might we wish to say more about how the definition of 'religion' promoted by the new dispensation helps to form post-hoc classifications of the old: not just the moral valency of the latter, but the very idea of what is to be seen as religious? If the Urapmin had converted to Islam rather than to Christianity, would their list of cultural items to discard have been the same? There are no simple or definitive answers to these questions, but they continue the work of asking how dismantling takes place – socially, politically, ideologically. How, in other words, do the authorized signifiers of self-consciously constructed absence emerge in a given situation, and how do they gain legitimacy?

From an analytical perspective, Robbins gives us some very useful tools to understand dissolution when we encounter it: we might focus on difficulties of practice, material erasure, the invocations of (but also distinctions between) replacement and displacement. Again, however, I wonder if we can go further in our questioning. How do we, and not just our informants, know *when* a tradition has come to an end? What temporal frame would satisfy us, or them? How complete, and widespread, does the disappearance have to be? Consider for instance the relationship between Judaism and Christianity: the latter has frequently displaced the former at local levels, but not globally; and it has done so in a way that has echoed categories of the past, as the new has displaced the old even as the old is regarded as prefiguring the new. In literate contexts especially, there is also the problem of the revival (reinvention) of religion. If the new attempts to re-invoke the long-defunct old, what are the implications for the disappearance thesis? Perhaps not many, in the sense that reinvention always has its own dynamic; but apparently extinct religions do sometimes turn out to belong interestingly and surprisingly to the decidedly undead. And even long-lost material traces can sometimes be 'miraculously' rediscovered when required.

Let me finally say a few words about comparisons. Robbins provocatively brings together three very different 'cases' here, and their differences point to varieties of religious dissolution. The Urapmin are small-scale and relatively isolated, and their conversion takes place collectively and remarkably quickly; Pentecostalism – perceived as a religious movement rather than a people – climbs up and down spatial and social scales with apparent ease, and its temporal currency of revival is measured through transformations that may be measured in weeks, months, decades; Judaism differs from these two cases not only because its main problem is attaining continuity (survival) rather than transformation, but also because its assessment of either can easily range over hundreds, even thousands, of years. We see how not just the presence, but the very scales, signifiers and moral valencies of dissolution shift according to the eye of

the beholder. But this is not a conclusion of despair; it points, as Robbins suggests, to where we can productively begin our analysis.

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## Constructing Continuity

*Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, University of Cambridge*

History is shaped by winners, and the stories of conversion to Christianity are no exception in this regard. By directing our attention to those religions that declined as a result of the conversion process and by addressing *how* they disappeared, Joel Robbins moves our focus to the mechanics of loss. The losers themselves remain silent, since the victors articulate the reasons for religious change. Even when viewed through a Christian lens, the perspective of those abandoning an earlier form of worship (or in some cases, of those chronicling the transformation) comes more clearly into view.

The processes Robbins delineates resonate across continents and back through time. In downgrading their ancestral gods from supernatural creatures to human beings, the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea rationalized, like medieval Irish and Scandinavians (among others) did before them. As euhemerized pagan deities, the *æsir* in Norse mythology are often linked with exiles from Troy (Faulkes 1978–9: 120–124). Their Irish equivalents, *Túatha Dé Danann*, suffer a similar fate, appearing in some texts as decidedly human (Carey 1999: 15–19). The earth goddess, Afek, noted by Robbins, is thus in a long line of demoted gods. Nonetheless, a range of attitudes to what are literary representations of pre-Christian figures is evidenced in medieval sources. Demonization of them is contrasted with more benevolent attempts to explain their nature as fallen angels or as beings who survived the Flood (see Carey 1999 and Faulkes 1978–9). This spirit of conciliation is also reflected in what is in effect an early origin-legend to account for an extant body of vernacular law. While Afek's system of cultural norms was displaced to make way for a Christian social structure, a ninth-century Irish author claimed that a trio each of bishops, kings and scholars together formulated existing law (Carey 1994: 5; Ní Mhaonaigh 2013: 110). Moreover, practitioners of paganism (the druid in some contexts) can explain the main tenets of Christian belief, including the Crucifixion (Meyer 1906: 8–9).

Notwithstanding its superficial veneer, the deference accorded ancestor figures in these historical settings seems more nuanced than the wholesale displacement of them

found in the more recent contexts with which Robbins is concerned. The medieval authors were concerned with constructing their peoples' past and distant past, of which pre-Christian beings were made to form an integral part. As writers of history (as they conceived it), they presented pagan forebears in a close and frequently direct relationship to themselves and their contemporaries. This conceptual framework invited and accommodated a liberal attitude towards representatives of an earlier time.

Positive (or indeed neutral) portrayal of ancient gods allows the construction of a narrative of continuity from old religion to new. This provides an example of the creativity Robbins discusses which the preservation (in the sense of conscious recreation) of tradition can bring forth. His appeal to scholars to reconceptualize the notion of continuity – and to problematize it in effect – in the light of his examination of religious collapse is pertinent also for both historians and literary scholars who deal with sources in which continuity is never as it seems.

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## But Whose Categories Are These?

*Don Seeman, Emory University*

No one has done more than Joel Robbins to remind anthropology of its habitual blind spots. He has argued, for example, that while the idea of cultural rupture may be central to the deep structure of Christian conversion experience, the consistent tendency of anthropology has been in essence to 'debunk' such claims by searching out evidence of deeply embedded structural continuities. It is not that the continuities

are merely invented – Pentecostal preservation of traditional spirit cosmologies in the guise of Satanic antipodes to Christian worship has been extensively documented – but rather that the spirit of debunking itself can prevent anthropologists from attending to the simultaneous reality of rupture and redemptive new beginning that converts experience. African Pentecostals pose these problems in one way, Urapmin Christians in another. Rather than adapt the traditional spirit world to their new theological sensibilities, Robbins' Urapmin seem to simply acknowledge the moral costs of cultural rupture. 'We have abandoned the ancestors,' they say, and cannot return to them now. Though Robbins does not use this terminology, it seems as if the Urapmins' traditional religion was doomed by nothing more than a shift in attention that allowed Christian penitence and prayer to fill and usurp the intentional space that had once been filled by filial piety. The difficult and ultimately unanswered question to which Robbins has addressed himself in a number of settings is why this change in attention became so quickly compelling to so many Urapmin.

As a counterpoint to the experience of the Urapmin, Robbins invokes Steven Weitzman's historical account of Jewish religious persistence in antiquity. Robbins is writing in opposition to what he considers a typical anthropological presumption that continuity needs no explanation. The ancient Jews in Weitzman's account are useful in this regard because they emerge as active interpreters and institution builders working dynamically to pull a sense of continuity from the jaws of radical and often devastating change. 'Religions that make their own persistence an important value,' Robbins summarizes laconically, 'are likely to fare relatively better than those that do not when new religions move to push them aside.' Surely the more important idea to emerge from this comparison is that the reason ancient Judaism prioritized its own survival is that its practitioners thought survival *mattered* because they were parties to a divine covenant that was worth living and dying for. There is, in other words, a kind of moral intuition at work in the decision to prioritize persistence, and this is not something that anthropologists should ignore. The decision to prioritize persistence, moreover, also implied an evaluative process that implicitly identified those aspects of the inherited tradition that were non-negotiable or nearly so, those which could be let go under duress and those of which the persistence would require the adoption of cultural mechanisms not dreamed of by the ancestors – like substituting the study of the sacrificial laws for sacrifice itself. The question of continuity is therefore an interpretive taxonomic one that can only be addressed in emic rather than external analytic terms.

To this day, many academic scholars insist on imposing a hard terminological distinction between 'Israelite religion' and later Judaism because they have imposed (sometimes for their own ideological reasons) a strong discontinuity where the people they are ostensibly describing did not acknowledge one.

I want to be clear that I think there is nothing wrong with creating analytic taxonomies that differ from those by which people navigate their own local moral worlds, but the supposition that these taxonomies necessarily trump local knowledge considerations would be a sign of an all-too-common but analytically obtuse hubris. What counts as continuity or change in some particular semiotic regime is ultimately a moral or interpretive question more than an empirical one, and it can only be answered by the people who have something at stake in the outcome. As an anthropologist

who has worked in the Ethiopian Jewish (Beta Israel) community, I am constantly fielding well-meaning questions about whether Beta Israel can be considered 'real Jews', according to some hypothetical standard, despite the many ways in which their religious history and practice differ from those of Jews from other parts of the world. The questioners want a 'scientific' answer and they are frustrated when I do not give them one. The question of kinship negotiated between Ethiopian and other Jews over the last century and a half was a negotiation over *which* points of connection mattered more and which mattered less to people on both sides of the equation. It was a messy, often painful and somewhat open-ended process. But there is no alternative. If we want to know how religions end, or indeed how they persevere, we need to stop assuming that we know what religions are and attend instead to the negotiated moral languages through which they emerge.

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## Author's Reply: On Morality, Time and Religious Disappearance

*Joel Robbins*

I am grateful to the commentators for their thoughtful responses to my article, and for their willingness to enter into the experimental, open-ended spirit of the argument about religious disappearance that I have attempted to construct. This is the kind of article in which one seeks mostly to pose what one hopes is a relatively novel question in a crisp enough way that it might elicit some interest from readers who have not considered it before. As such, my own answers to the question of how religions disappear were meant to be suggestive, but not in any sense exhaustive or aimed at something like the development of a theory. The respondents have each pushed forward the effort to open up this area of investigation in these same terms, allowing their responses and the article itself to attain a kind of coherence not always in evidence in this kind of dialogic format. Individually, the responses are very rich, especially given their brevity. I will comment on only a few of the shared concerns that emerge.

Simon Coleman and Don Seeman both draw attention to the linked moral and (to use Seeman's term) interpretive aspects of most processes of religious dissolution. What is to count as a 'religion', such that it can be discarded, needs to be determined before

any efforts to dismantle it will be made, and what is to count as ‘disappearance’ needs to be negotiated as well. As Coleman points out, what it is that one is turning to – be it a new religion like Christianity or Islam, or a perceived lack of religion as in secularist transformations – will profoundly shape what one sees as in need of abandonment and what will count as a sign that such abandonment has been decisively achieved. Seeman notes that this process of definition will always be a morally loaded one, steeped in evaluative choices. This is as true, he reminds us in his discussion of Jewish ideas of covenant, of efforts to define a ‘religion’ worth preserving as it is of those aimed at defining a ‘religion’ to leave behind. Girish Daswani (2013) has recently given us an ethnographically rich account of the moral lives of Ghanaian Pentecostals involved in negotiating this kind of dramatic religious change. His work fully supports the claims Coleman and Seeman make that such a focus on moral negotiation can be very fruitful in the study of the complexities of religious disappearance.

Another point Coleman raises with some force is that of how to settle on the time frames within which to study religious demise. The time frame of the Urapmin conversion and of the rise and fall of the Pentecostal trends I mentioned are both relatively short. Would the adoption of a longer view lead us to tell a different kind of story, and in what ways would the discrepancies between the resulting stories matter? Máire Ní Mhaonaigh and Aparecida Vilaça both address such questions. Ní Mhaonaigh examines the case of medieval Christian authors looking back on the ‘past and distant past’ with a more ‘nuanced’ view of their ancestors than the Urapmin currently display. The relatively gentle, morally open, euhemerizing impulses of these historians find more of a creative place for those who came before them than the Urapmin have as yet been able to offer their forebears. A question for the anthropology of cultural change in general is the extent to which we want to see something like the softening of attitudes this comparison brings to the fore as primarily a matter of the passage of time and generations. It has often seemed to me that this is probably right, at least as an assumption about where to begin an investigation of these kinds of differences in attitude towards one’s past religion, and I have often conceded the point when people observe that the harsh Urapmin approach to their former religion can easily be explained by the claim that it represents the kind of response adopted mostly by first generation converts and almost no one else. But in considering this point in the light of Ní Mhaonaigh’s empirically substantiated case, I find myself wanting to say that the passage of time alone is not an explanation (which, I should make clear, is not what Ní Mhaonaigh herself is suggesting, but is one that people confronted with such comparative accounts often do suggest). At least in the Urapmin case, their determination to strip the ancestors (and the nature spirits) of all creative power is motivated by their intense engagement in working out the ramifications of the idea that all creative force belongs to God (see Robbins 2009 for a more detailed argument along these lines). This kind of cosmological consistency would need to come to matter less to them if they were to consider restoring to the ancestors (and to the nature spirits) some of the powers the Christian cosmology has taken from them. This new cosmology has already helped the Urapmin accomplish some things they are grateful for, like the abandonment of their system of food and gender-related taboos – no longer necessary in a world the ancestors did not create and the spirits have no right to control. Perhaps

once the taboos are wholly forgotten, the Urapmin will not care so much about God's creative power, or they will not worry about being consistent in their interpretation of its ramifications. But even if this is the case, time and the passing of generations alone would not be enough to bring the ancestors back. The Urapmin would have to change their understanding of what it is they are trying to do, such that developing a consistent understanding of the Christian cosmos was no longer a primary goal for them.

The historians Ní Mhaonaigh writes about, as far as I can tell, are like the Urapmin engaged in a particular kind of project – not so much one of rationalizing a cosmology after the Urapmin fashion as creating a deep historical narrative that would be useful in the present for which they wrote. It is this project that allows the ancestors a valued place in the story they tell. Vilaça, too, sets her analysis of Wari' approaches to religious change in the context of a broader Wari' project. This is a project that, in contrast to the Jewish one I discussed and Seeman also considers, has never been about preserving a religion. The Wari' have always been eager to adopt things from outside their previous experience, and have also been involved in a fierce struggle to maintain their humanity in the face of the potential transformations animal predation can draw them into. Christianity in general, and the creation account of Genesis in particular, are of immediate help in this project (with God's creative power again playing a central role). This is why the Wari' take it up. In this process, the old religion is more left behind than dismantled – this is Seeman's shift in attention (an image that fits Wari' perspectivism nicely in some respects), or Coleman's apathy, in action. And because the old religion is more left behind than taken apart, the Wari' can go back to it, as they already have once before. One might even speculate that after disattending to their old religion for a while, it strikes the Wari' as enough of an outside force to be worth taking up again. Be that as it may, Vilaça does tell us that soon the generation that knows how to find the old religion again will be gone, and this, more than any concerted effort to destroy it, will finally make it disappear. Here time works in another direction, not leading to a softening of anti-traditional attitudes, but to their final triumph. Again, we are led to conclude that in the study of religious dissolution, the passage of time will always bequeath us more questions than answers.

Out of this rich set of responses, I have drawn out some shared concerns with morality, temporality and something I have glossed as a need to attend to the wider projects in which people are engaged as they lose interest in, abandon or actively dismantle religions they once practised. To return to my opening remarks, these concerns by no means exhaust the kinds of issues that might be raised by a focus on how religions disappear. The hope is only that they suggest the value of defining the phenomenon of religious disappearance as one that is worthy of our attention.

## References

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