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The Next Christendom: the coming of global Christianity a Review Article

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A review article of

The Next Christendom: the coming of global Christianity

Philip Jenkins

Oxford University Press, 2002, pbk, pp 270, £8.99, ISBN 0-19-516891-7

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This book was named top religion book by *USA Today* and also received good notices in the *New York Times Book Review*. And for good reason. It is one of the first accounts that draws out the implications of changing global demographics when these are linked with religious affiliations. Its author is Distinguished Professor of History and Religious Studies at Pennsylvania State University.

In essence, the north, or the western world, that is North America and Europe, is seeing population stagnation and the decline of Christianity in the face of an overwhelming secularisation. In the south, particularly in Africa and Asia, but in any case in the less economically powerful part of the world, Christianity is booming in countries where the population is set to rise. By projecting these figures forward it is possible to see into the future -- or into potential futures. Jenkins takes note of the missionary element within Islam and predicts, with reason, likely clashes between supernaturalistic vibrant Christianity and militant conservative Islam. Where, at the moment, there is religious competition, by 2050 there may well be geo-political power struggles or bloody wars.

We begin with an account of the pessimistic expectations of extreme liberal Christians like Bishop John Spong of Newark who recommends a sceptical and secularised 'new reformation' to hasten the disappearance of organised religion and facilitate its replacement by quasi-religious spirituality. Against this, the Christianity of the south is in stark contrast. It was, of course, planted by European powers at the time of colonial or imperial expansion and, for this reason, western liberals tend to disparage it. Jenkins, however, shows that even if African and Asian converts to Christianity were originally aligning themselves with their colonial rulers, the retention of Christianity long after the colonial rulers have disappeared from the scene, is an indication that religious roots go authentically deep. Indeed, once the imperial tide rolled back, indigenous churches could find themselves under persecution and many produced martyrs. So it is historically inaccurate to advance the proposition that Christianity within southern countries is simply a relic of imperial expansion that should, in an age of national self-determination, be swept aside. On the contrary Christianity of the south is at once genuine and expressive of the ancient culture of the countries where it thrives.

African Christianity is more likely to be contextualised than northern Christianity. Perhaps northern Christians simply do not recognise the substratum of pagan religion that has been incorporated within their beliefs and practices: the date of Christmas or the name of Easter. So African Christianity, much of it distinctively Pentecostal and charismatic in style, may include elements of traditional African religion. Polygamy may be practised in some parts, ancestor worship may be included in others and, nearly everywhere, the reality of the spirit world will be taken for granted. This produces a different kind of Christianity from the rational, legal Christianity of the Reformation or the typical sacerdotal form of Catholicism. As a result global Christianity itself is likely to change. No longer will the north be telling the south how Christianity should be constructed and practised. Rather the south will be telling the north that true Christianity is to be seen in exuberant worship, conservative morality and in the traditions of communitarianism – even tribalism - that mark African society as a whole.

Turning back to the development of northern (or western) Christianity, Jenkins is able to show how over simplified popular histories are. Although St Paul's mission definitely thrust westward, Christianity still was predominantly associated with the eastern half of the Roman Empire early in the fourth century. By the year 500 the Christian centre of gravity was in

Syria rather than Italy. The eastern churches had established Christianity in Syria, Armenia, Ethiopia, Egypt and even in India.

The rise of Islam hurt the eastern church though, quite quickly, Muslims and Christians was found ways to cohabit peacefully – even if Christians were disadvantageously taxed by their new masters. The Christian population of Egypt around 1200 was probably around 3 million and there were substantial Christian communities in Ethiopia and Nubia. But if this population survived the Muslim conquest so successfully, why is it such a small minority in the Middle East today? The answer is to be found in the political events of the Middle Ages when interfaith relations were violently transformed. Mongol hordes devastated centres of civilisation in the Middle East, including Islamic centres. The Christian crusaders allied themselves with the Mongols so that, when the Mongols were driven out, Christians were also defeated. Yet, the oddity about standard interpretations of this period of history is that, whereas most western Christians would feel the Crusades to have been a blot upon their heritage, and would feel a need to apologise for them, there seems to be no correlative move among Muslim historians to recognise that their own expansion was originally only gained by unprovoked aggression.

Catholic mission into China, Japan and India is itself a fascinating story though it is deeply ironic that Nagasaki, the city destroyed by the atomic bomb in 1945, had had a catholic bishop since 1596. Missions, both Protestant and Catholic, exploded into action in the 19th century but, in any event, the present map of Catholicism around the world can be seen as the ‘ghostly remnant of several empires -- the French and Portuguese, but above all, the Spanish’ (p 58). Protestantism partly reflects the now-defunct British Empire and the statistics of Anglicanism worldwide are a microcosm of what is happening to Christianity as a whole: Nigeria alone claims 20 million baptised Anglicans, and by 2050 the global total of Anglicans is likely to be 150 million of whom only a tiny minority will be white Europeans.

The figures indicate why the Roman Catholic Church is so generally conservative. It into makes no sense to pander to the complaints of the relatively small number of liberals in the dwindling western congregations when the future of Catholicism lies elsewhere. By 2025 Africans and Latin Americans will make up 66% of Catholics. Even in 2001 over 40% of cardinals eligible to vote in papal elections came from southern (or Third World) countries (p 195). An African or Latin American Pope seems a statistical certainty before the end of a century. It is within the Catholic Church’s own self-interest to strengthen its thriving southern dioceses even if, in the USA, publishing houses continue to produce books critical of the Vatican and harmonised with the latest philosophical and postmodern fashions.

Jenkins’s analysis of geo-politics is based on the religious balance of power among the largest nations of the 21st century. It is nations that contain large minorities that are likely to be drawn into a conflict and, if the conflict is at first internal to the country of origin, bordering nations containing co-religionists may well be drawn into any possible carnage. Thus the Philippines, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Germany and Uganda all contain significant Muslim minorities while Nigeria, Ethiopia and Tanzania contain Christian and Muslim groups in roughly equal balances. Although Indonesia, Egypt and the Sudan contain Christian minorities, these countries are more likely to be quiescent.

The crucial question is whether Christianity and Islam can coexist, as they have for many centuries and in many parts of the world. The Gulf States of Oman and the United Arab Emirates tolerate Christian worship and modern Palestine/Israel has been a model of Muslim-

Christian coexistence. The Pope was greeted by crowds of ordinary Muslims during his visits to Egypt in 2000 and Syria in 2001. Yet the long-term prognosis is not good. Although Christians have committed their share of atrocities not least of which was the Serbian massacre of Bosnian Muslims at Srebrenica 1995, the recent pattern of conflict has shifted decisively. Christians within the nine Nigerian states that have declared *sharia* law find themselves subject to restrictions relating to the role of women, inheritance, church activity and alcohol consumption, and to a criminal law that could result in floggings or mutilations. Not unnaturally, they prefer to move to regions more conducive to the practice of their faith and this internal population migration further polarises the situation. The importance of this imbalance within a country that is likely to contain 300 million people by 2050, and which supports an oil industry, can hardly be exaggerated.

There are other implications of all these changes. For instance, southern Christians are less likely than middle class Americans to be supportive of the Zionist cause in Israel. Their own experience is likely to make them sympathetic with impoverished Palestinians. This, in itself, may change the balance of power within the Middle East. Similarly, the defeat of liberal opinion at the 1998 Lambeth Conference and the rejection of homosexual activity was only achieved by alliance between western evangelicals and the numerical strength of southern conservatives: of the 736 bishops registered there, only 316 were from the United States, Canada or Europe combined, while Africa sent 224 and Asia 95. Or, to take another instance, fundamentalist Hinduism within India enforces legal discrimination against the Dalits who are 90% Christian. There seems little doubt that the official figures are designed to disguise the size of this community but, even if the official figures are correct, there are 23 million believers of this kind in India, a large enough group to provoke international attention. The recent surprise defeat of the BJP (Hindu nationalist party) is indicative of democratic impact Dalit and Christian voters can have on Indian elections.

All in all, this is an important book. It provides an account of religion across the world that is not dependent upon the outlook of secularised journalists or of jaded academics. It contains about 35 pages of bibliographical references from an impressive range of scholarly sources. It combines religion and politics without interpreting one in terms of the other. While multicultural Britain with its tradition of tolerance and coexistence has much to be proud of, other parts of the world are seeing naked exertions of power for the control of oil or land. And, as Jenkins only too clearly shows, what happens in Africa or Latin America or Asia will be reflected in the West through the immigrant communities now residing there. In this new global environment there is nowhere to hide from the tensions and conflicts enacted across the sea.