

BOOK REVIEW
THE NEXT CHRISTENDOM
by Philip Jenkins
(New York: Oxford University Press, 2002)

If one were to believe the media, it would seem that religion is one of the least newsworthy issues in the contemporary world. To the contrary, Jenkins demonstrates, *it is precisely religious changes that are the most significant, and even the most revolutionary, in the contemporary world.* We have been through times of religious change before, but what is happening on the religious world scene today is one of the most significant change-eras the world has ever scene. The huge shift today is away from white/western/northern-globe Christian dominance toward the growing Christendom giant in the Two-Thirds World. The world's largest Christian communities are now to be found in Latin America and Africa. In other words, Christianity is *going South*. What is surprising is that we Northern Christians have been virtually oblivious to this dramatic shift. Smugly tucked away into our safe enclaves of Northern Christianity, the world of Christendom has changed while we weren't looking. For some reason, our missiologists and journalists have been caught napping. Why didn't anyone tell us that the number of Christians in Africa *increased, staggeringly, from 10 million in 1900 to 360 million by 2000?* (p. 4)

Uganda is today 75% Christian. By year 2050, the Philippines should possess the third or fourth largest number of Christians in the world. (p. 91) [See chart of *The Largest Christian Populations in the World* on page 90] By contrast, 44% of British people claim no religious affiliation and *almost half of young adults do not even believe that Jesus existed as a historical person.* Overall, 40% of British people claim a Christian identification, which is often only superficial. It will be fascinating to see what immigration produces spiritually in these declining-population, post-Christian states. Today, London is almost half non-white; Frankfurt is 30% immigrant; Vienna is 20% Muslim; the United States is 11% immigrant--and these people are bringing their religions with them. This may herald a new *missionary dawn* as the flow of missionaries shifts to *south-to-north*. As an American Christian, I am heartened to discover that, in contrast to all the major, historically Christian nations, the United States is still substantially a Christian nation, and will continue to be so for decades to come. But, we are the last of such nations *to occupy this role in the twenty-first century* (p. 105).

A further intrigue is that while Northern Christianity has liberalized, its Southern counterpart exhibits a marked conservatism in both morals and doctrine. They are preoccupied with supernatural expressions and with personal salvation. Indeed, *the dominant current in emerging world Christianity is traditionalist, orthodox, and supernatural.* (p. 8) Pessimism regarding the health and survival of Christianity in the Northern climes seems oddly out of step with the robustness of Southern Christendom. In fact, by the end of the 20th century, due to the expansion of Christianity in places like Latin America, Africa, and China, something unprecedented has happened: Christianity has emerged for the first time as a universal religion. (p. 38) This health and growth is surprising to our culture which has been propagandized by anti-missionary fiction such as

the best-selling *The Poisonwood Bible*, which paints its missionary to Africa as a near lunatic of extremism and repressed guilt, and an unabashed culture destroyer who not only fails to evangelize the Africans but destroys the faith and solidarity of his own family. Few more tragic books have been written. Despite this negativity, the African church is alive and well and the missionaries have elicited widespread appreciation.

How do we account for this phenomenal expansion of Christianity? At the heart of the explanation is the healthy sense of community that comes with Christianity. In countries where the family structure has been disintegrating and wives live with the abuse and fear of drunken husbands, the security of a healthful spiritual “family” provides an appealing security. Additionally, within the Pentecostal expressions, there is the appeal of the miraculous as people look with hope to God for relief from poverty and sickness. The prosperity gospel sells well in the Two-Thirds World. Marginalized minorities are given recognition and a voice, whether they are women or Blacks or mestizo people of Brazil.

The decline of Christendom market-share in the North coincides with declining population figures in the North. In 1900 the Northern nations accounted for 32% of world population. By year 2000 this figure had shrunk to 18% and projections for year 2050 place the figure at 10 or 12 percent (p. 19). History indicates that as prosperity increases, childbirth rates decline. As a result of this, the native populations of the white Europeans are in decline. It takes a fertility rate of 2.1 children per woman to maintain a stable population. Many European nations have a current fertility rate below 1.5 (p. 82). European whites are being out-paced not just by conversions, but by births. The only way these societies can stay economically viable is by the importation of foreign workers.

In any demographic study of Christianity, the matter of definition is crucial. The author clarifies his definition on page 88:

For the purposes of this book, a Christian is someone who describes himself or herself as Christian, who believes that Jesus is not merely a prophet or an exalted moral teacher, but in some unique sense the Son of God, and the messiah. Beyond that, we should not inquire into detailed doctrine, whether for instance a person adheres to the Bible alone, accepts the Trinity, or has a literal belief in Jesus' bodily resurrection. The vast majority of self-described Christians worldwide do in fact meet most of these criteria for membership in the faith, but for present purposes, we cannot label as heretics those who do not.

The author's honesty is refreshing, but, nonetheless, it does make me as a conservative evangelical feel cautious about quoting his statistics about the state of Christendom in the southern world. His broad definition admits heretics and cults. Knowing that, one feels only cautiously enthusiastic about the state of global Christianity. It does exclude Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism, but it also includes some strange bedfellows. I am amused by his characterization of those who do not admit Mormonism to the Christian fold as “hard-line Northern observers” (p. 66) and calls this a “controversial step.” (p. 104)

This book is a potent antidote to white cultural superiority. I suspect that almost all white American Christians are possessed, usually unconsciously, with a spiritual superiority complex. It is healthy for prejudice to be goaded with the facts. Our southern-world brothers and sisters in the faith exhibit spiritual qualities that should convict us and motivate us to spiritual growth. We need to learn the humility to embrace collegial and servant roles with non-white believers. We have been conditioned to being the teachers and the leaders. Increasingly we need to condition ourselves to be the associates and the followers. Paternalism must surrender to brotherhood.

These are disturbing days for whites. Muslims are rioting in Europe. Hispanics are demonstrating in California and Colorado. This awakens ethnic fear, resentment, and anger that are unprecedented to my “white” generation. Xenophobia may not be far behind. Even evangelicals may lose their redemptive perspective. Evangelism and Christian community may get lost in a new surge of isolationism. As an individual Christian as well as a Christian leader, these are fears that I must confront and resist.

Timothy G. Walton
November 24, 2008