

Book Review

Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). 270 pages.

Reviewed by Warren B. Newberry, D.Th.,
Visiting Professor of Missions at Assemblies of God Theological Seminary

Philip Jenkins is distinguished professor of History and Religious Studies at the Pennsylvania State University and author of eighteen books, including *Mystics and Messiahs*, *Hidden Gospels*, *New Anti-Catholicism* (2003), and more than 120 published chapters and articles.

Even before *The Next Christendom* came on the market, readers anticipated its release. “The Next Christianity,” Jenkins’ article in *Atlantic Monthly* (October 2002), was a sampling of things to come. The book was an immediate success, and speaking invitations poured in. Jenkins proudly admits to thirty-five “invited lectures” from April to October 2004 at universities, churches, seminaries, mission boards and foundations on the topic of “The Next Christendom.” In doing an Internet *Google* search, I discovered 2060 reviews of this work, which is indicative of the exceptional interest in the subject.

USA Today selected *The Next Christendom* as one of the top religion books of 2002. *Booklist* named it “Editor’s Choice for Best Books of 2002.” The Association of Theological Booksellers presented Jenkins the *Theologos* award of 2002, and he won the 2003 *Christianity Today* Book Award in the category of “Christianity and Culture.” Jenkins also won The

Gold Medallion Book Award of the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association in the category of “Christianity and Society.”

Jenkins’s thesis is that though present-day Christianity is flourishing, its center is shifting from the Northern to the Southern Hemisphere. He argues that, as the Western world becomes post-Christian, “the two main centers of Christianity will be Africa and Latin America” (12). Believing that both continents are experiencing similar social and theological stages of growth, Jenkins says it is only a matter of time until they discover each other and a new era of world religion emerges. When that happens, we will speak of a “new Christendom,” based in the Southern Hemisphere.

“The Rise of the New Christianity,” the subject of chapter five, is the heart of Jenkins’s thesis. While identifying the current global religious situation, he shines when making futuristic projections some fifty years in advance. Admitting that projecting that far ahead might be considered foolish, Jenkins postulates that sufficient demographic data is available to justify observations in his crystal ball, with the caveat that projections work only as long as people and societies maintain the present behavior.

Jenkins emphasizes the declining population growth of the Western world (the North) and a projected booming population growth in the “South,” which is equated with the Two-Thirds world regardless of geographical location. Jenkins contrasts post-Christian Europe with “Christian America.” While noting there is diversity, both ethnically and religiously, between Europe and the United States, he predicts America will be the last Western Christian nation in the twenty-first century.

Southern Christianity more closely emulates first-century Christianity than does its Northern counterpart. Given a worldview that encompasses the supernatural, it is no wonder that religion in Africa, Latin America, and Asia Pacific finds fertile soil. No other area of faith and practice divides Northern and Southern Christians as much as the matter of spiritual forces and their effects in the everyday affairs of humankind. The issues of healing and spiritual warfare and the use of both the Old and New Testaments remain in the forefront of Southern Christianity.

Pentecostal-style worship dominates much of the liturgy of Southern Christians. Whether in Latin America, Africa or Asia Pacific, Pentecostalism (very loosely defined) is the order of the day. For example, the El Shaddai movement in the Philippines, though firmly rooted in Roman Catholicism, looks like a classical Pentecostal movement. The African Initiated Churches (AICs) display the appearance of Pentecostalism and are considered by some scholars to fall within the ranks of Southern Christianity. David Cho’s Yoido Full Gospel Church in Korea numbers more than half a million members and is Pentecostal.¹

While tackling the historical differences between Christianity and Islam, Jenkins observes that for the most part these two religious giants have coexisted rather peacefully. However, he cautions that the “long-term prognosis for interfaith relations is not good.... The two sisters are simply too much alike to live side by side” (169). Jenkins writes several pages to indicate how politics can exacerbate Muslim-Christian relations. Cycles of violence have become so commonplace they often are ignored. When the Jewish question is added to the mix, an interesting equation emerges. Jenkins predicts that the present disparity between the Jewish and Muslim populations (twenty million Jews to one billion Muslims) will grow in the coming decades. He questions whether the relationship between Christians of the North (especially in America) and Muslims can improve in the future, especially if the United States maintains its current Middle East policy of being “virulently anti-Muslim” (181).

Jenkins also argues that Christian expansion threatens to provoke violent reactions from Hinduism and Buddhism, two other major world religions. Demographic studies indicate that India’s population could surpass that of China in the future. By 2040-2050, India’s population is estimated to reach 1.5 billion and could include 1.2 billion Hindus. Buddhism will assert itself to regain its stature as a major player and “will add another irritant to the religious politics of the coming century” (185).

As Southern Christianity has grown, it has sent its missionaries to the shores of Europe and North America to re-Christianize the North. Despite the critics who point to the general secularization of the United States,

Jenkins observes that American Christianity is alive and well (207).

Clearly, Jenkins has followed Barrett's lead of broadly defining "Pentecostalism" to include, for example, classical Pentecostals at one end of the spectrum and African Initiated Churches at the other. Defining "Pentecostalism" in these terms allows Jenkins to paint his scenarios with broad-brush strokes. For instance, he states, "Pentecostal believers rely on direct spiritual revelations that supplement or even replace biblical authority" (63). Classical Pentecostals would not concur, and I am more comfortable with Dana Robert's call for a tighter definition of the term, "Pentecostal."²

Jenkins foresees a future major clash between Christianity and Islam. In today's context, "the memory of the Crusades still has an embittering effect on Muslim-Christian relations."³ In the future, this bitterness and animosity probably will not change.

Beyond the scope of Jenkins's book but extremely relevant to any projections of the future, stands the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit. Scripture tells us "the wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going" (John 3:8, NIV). No manner of planning and projections will negate the sovereign move of God's Spirit. Certainly, this must remain in the back of our minds as we applaud Jenkins for a wonderful book. As a foreign missionary for several decades and a student of evangelism, I have seen dry areas that were considered to be void of any spiritual life blossom with life in God's timing

Finally, agreeing with Jenkins that Christianity in America is alive and well depends on one's definition of "Christianity." It is troubling to look around and see a nation in which people are encouraged to practice lifestyles, ethics and morals that are contrary to Scripture. Nevertheless, in spite of these negative realities, there are signs of spiritual life in the United States. The exit polls taken during the November 2004 presidential election indicated more of the population is concerned with Christian morals and family values than was once thought.

Pentecostal theology espouses a worldview that is more at home with Southern Christianity, and Pentecostals should not be surprised at Jenkins's thesis of the rise of the South. Southern Christians would argue that one of the reasons for their "success" is their belief in signs and wonders and miracles.⁴ Anthropologist/educator Paul Hiebert correctly observed that the normal Western view of reality is two-tiered, incorporating science and religion but excluding the supernatural.⁵ He argues that a holistic theological model should include a third tier between religion and science that embraces a theology of the supernatural, referred to as the "excluded middle."

The South has turned northward, (204ff) and southern ministers are finding hospitable reception. Not only are southern churches looking to North America and Europe for fertile ground and converts, but Africans, for example, are serving as pastors in some of the largest Pentecostal/charismatic congregations in the Ukraine

Jenkins is to be applauded for excellent scholarship and his exceptional grasp of

the relevant literature. I recommend the book to anyone involved in ministry today. Any negative aspects are

diminished by the tremendous insights it contains.

¹ Recent statistics give the number as more than 750,000.

² Dana Robert, "Shifting Southward: Global Christianity since 1945," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 24 (April 2000), 57.

³ Charis Waddy, *The Muslim Mind* 2nd ed. (London: Longman Group Limited, 1982), 124. For further insights into the mentality behind the crusades see Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books, 1964), 113-116.

⁴ Of the worldwide fraternal constituency of 50,718,028 adherents of the Assemblies of God, fewer than three million reside within the United States.

⁵ Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994), 196ff.