

# Headed South

Philip Jenkins's *The Next Christendom* looks at the growth of Christianity in South America, Africa, and Asia, and what that means for the Church's future.

**I**n early March, Andrew Walls of the Centre for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World at University of Edinburgh lectured at North Park Theological Seminary. At one point, he made a claim that was meant to capture our imagination: In the 21st century, Christianity in Africa will be church historians' history.

By that, Walls meant that the center of Christianity, which has moved from Jerusalem to Antioch to Rome to Western Europe to America, has now shifted once again—to Africa. He did not think of this shift as something to fear or regret, but rather as something to celebrate. The gospel continues to spread, the Church continues to grow! Thank God.

After Walls's lecture, I read *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* by Philip Jenkins from Oxford

Press. Jenkins looks at the same evidence as Walls—Christianity is growing rapidly in the Southern Hemisphere, often in countries with the fastest population growth, while Christianity is shrinking in the Northern Hemisphere. Like Walls, Jenkins thinks that “over the past century . . . the center of gravity of the Christian world has shifted inexorably southward.” In the next century, Jenkins looks for Christians in Africa and Latin America to “discover” one another, to interact in ways that bring “a new Christendom, based in the Southern Hemisphere.”

He intentionally uses the term “Christendom,” which he says refers to “widespread intolerance, symbolized at its very worst by aggressive Crusades, heresy hunts, and religious pogroms,” because—unlike Walls—Jenkins imagines southern Christian-

ity as a mixed blessing. He expects that current trends in Christianity and Islam may create “a volatile mixture that could well provoke horrific wars and confrontations.” Then, just in case his reader is still a bit too complacent, Jenkins imagines a “worst-case” future including “a wave of religious conflicts reminiscent of the Middle Ages, a new age of Christian crusades and Muslim jihads.”

“Imagine the world of the thirteenth century armed with nuclear warheads and anthrax,” he writes.

Imagine indeed! In this article, I hope to suggest specific ways that Jenkins's book helps and hinders a faithful Christian imagination. But first, an overall impression: this is a “heavy” book, difficult to read in two ways. First, the book is stuffed with statistics about

D. Brent Laytham is assistant professor of theology at North Park Theological Seminary.

church membership and population growth, and brimming with descriptions of mission work and modern Christianity. In fact, the text is so full of facts, numbers, and details that the reader is regularly in danger of being overwhelmed by data.

Second, the book is heavy with premonitions of a future that appears short on hope and long on threat. Because Jenkins is a legitimate scholar—distinguished professor of history and religious studies at Penn State University—and because the book is based in extensive research—thirty-five pages of footnotes that prove he’s read nearly everything—there is a temptation to assume that he must be right. Yet, as Andrew Walls suggests, this same evidence is amenable to other, more hopeful interpretations.

### A Global Faith

The first question that Jenkins’s book makes you ask is this: When you pray the Lord’s Prayer, who is included in

and most despised, and following appropriate rules of Christian humility,” or to dress in silk, identifying themselves “as members of the social elite, who could win the respect of lords and gentry.” These stories of gospel acculturation invite all of us to reflect on the relation of gospel and culture. They raise the questions: What are faith’s essentials and what is just so much cultural baggage? In other stories, Jenkins reminds us of Christian commitment in the face of hardship, and of courage in the face of persecution. Almost from the beginning, we Christians have been a diverse and interesting crowd.

We still are. This is probably the central point Jenkins wants to make (more important to him than the hype about Christian crusaders armed with anthrax). Global Christianity is a grand and growing phenomenon. Jenkins is convinced that most European and American Christians tend to think of Christianity as primarily a northern

## “OVER THE PAST CENTURY . . . THE CENTER OF GRAVITY OF THE CHRISTIAN WORLD HAS SHIFTED INEXORABLY SOUTHWARD.”

the first word, “our”? Too often, I fail to imagine just how big that “our” really is. Jenkins expands the imagination, showing how diverse and full the “our” has been, is, and will continue to be. Jenkins suggests that Christianity has always been a global religion, and for the first thousand years one that “was stronger in Asia and North Africa than in Europe.”

More interesting than the statistics of Christianity’s post-Pentecost spread South and East are the stories Jenkins includes to illustrate his points. Some stories detail the hard question that missionaries have always faced—how do you retell the gospel, which you have heard in your own cultural idiom, in the idiom of another culture? For example, Japanese missionaries had to decide whether to dress in cotton, thereby “identifying with the poorest

phenomenon. The “Southern church,” he claims, “remains almost invisible to Northern observers.” According to his statistics, Latin America and Africa already have more Christians than Europe and North America.

So “if we want to visualize a ‘typical’ contemporary Christian,” Jenkins writes, “we should think of a woman living in a village in Nigeria or in a Brazilian favela.”

What Christianity will look like in the future is impossible to know for sure. But Jenkins is convinced that given rapid population growth and ongoing conversions, the vast majority of global Christianity will be southern. “By 2050, only about one-fifth of the world’s 3 billion Christians will be non-Hispanic Whites,” he writes. “Soon, the phrase ‘a White Christian’ may sound like a curious oxymoron,

as mildly surprising as ‘a Swedish Buddhist.’” Jenkins’s rhetoric is hyperbolic, but his analysis of the data is not. It invites us to imagine a genuinely global community of fellow Christians united in prayer to “our Father.”

### A Different Faith

There are times, though, when Jenkins casts his net too widely. He is willing to count as Christian virtually any movement that claims to be so. A telling example is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints or Mormons. Jenkins counts Mormons as Christians, and suggests that anyone who doesn’t is a “hard-line Northern observer.” This means, of course, that both the National Council of Churches and the National Association of Evangelicals are “hard-liners” as both groups are clear that while Mormons do hold certain beliefs about Jesus Christ, they do not hold faith in Jesus Christ.

This example points to a central issue for Christian faith: distinguishing between a faith that is different and a different faith. When the Covenant celebrates freedom in Christ, it affirms the goodness of the former—a Christian faith that is different from my own. *Covenant Affirmations* puts it this way: freedom in Christ “allows for differences of opinion in matters of interpretation, doctrine, and practice within the context of biblical guidelines and historical Christianity.” Thus our very freedom in Christ demands that we continually ask how far difference can stretch before it breaks off from historical Christianity and becomes something else.

Another flaw in the book is Jenkins’s seeming agenda to exaggerate the difference between Christian North and South. So throughout the book, descriptions of a Christianity that is diverse, enthusiastic, intriguing or vibrant are always descriptions of Southern Christianity. This strategy strengthens the impression that Southern Christianity is “a very exotic beast indeed, intriguing, exciting, and a lit-

**"IF WE WANT TO VISUALIZE A 'TYPICAL' CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN," JENKINS WRITES, "WE SHOULD THINK OF A WOMAN LIVING IN A VILLAGE IN NIGERIA OR IN A BRAZILIAN FAVELA."**

tle frightening." Northern Christianity, Jenkins implies by omission, is a fairly tame beast—anemic, uniform, and a little sad.

I am not suggesting that Jenkins is entirely wrong. I hope that many will read his book, and then reflect carefully on its contents. For example, when he argues that demographic trends within world Christianity make it highly likely that Southern Christianity will claim a position of leadership, he makes a strong case. For us, though, the case should not be a matter left to census takers—whoever has the majority gets to run the show. Rather, how we respond to this change should be rooted in a moral sense of the necessity of shared leadership and mutual upbuilding through the shared gifts of global Christianity.

**Religious Violence?**

It is important to challenge the account of religious violence that Jenkins gives throughout the book. He suggests, and the advertising of his book emphasizes, that the most significant source of violence in the coming century will be attributable to religion.

But it is never that easy to say what violence is religious and what violence is not. The present situation helps to reveal the degree to which "religious violence" is always an interpretation. But how should the story of the recent U.S./Iraq conflict be told? Is it a classic confrontation between Islam and Christianity? I don't think so, but some do. (Tellingly, one of the interpretations that shapes Jenkins's argument most significantly is Samuel Huntington's notion of "the clash of civilizations"—an argument that the Christian West and the Islamic East are in a battle for survival.)

If the recent conflict is described as a religious confrontation, what makes it so? The professed faith of the lead-

ers of the two nations involved? The faith of the majority of citizens of the nations involved? The equation of democracy with Christianity and of autocracy with Islam? If violence has been done, was it religious violence? Given the presence of Muslims in the armed forces of the United States, and of Christians in the armed forces of Iraq, we could rightly talk about violence done by religious persons or violence that includes religious motivations (though never exclusively religious). But surely it would be a descriptive mistake to call this war "religious violence." And more importantly, surely we must continue to discuss when, if ever, Christians are allowed to do violence.

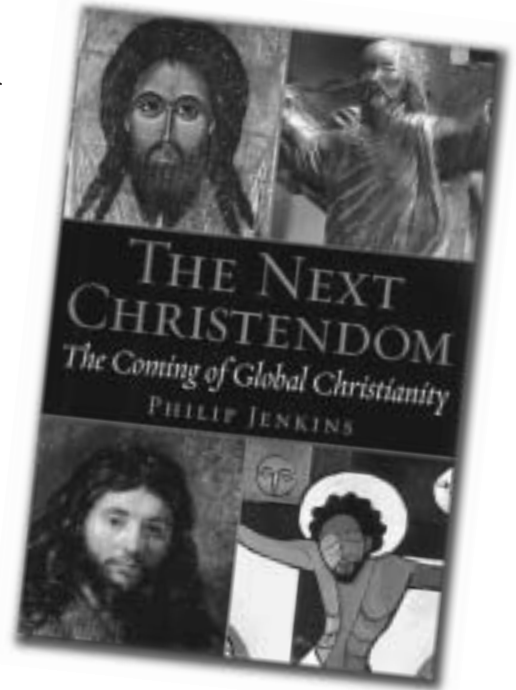
**What Should We Do Now?**

For Christians, now as always, the appropriate question is how to respond. Not just to the current crisis (whatever it is at the moment you read this article). And not just to the historical and demographic data that Jenkins presents. Most fundamentally, the question is and always has been how to respond to the gift of the gospel—the good news of new life in Christ.

Two things are sure. Things change. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. We North American Christians need hold loosely to "the present form of this world which is passing away" (1 Corinthians 7:31), while clinging tightly to "the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1:11). Telling the difference requires the gift of discernment, for which we must earnestly pray. We also need to learn the stories of our brothers and sisters in the South, both by studying their histories and more importantly through face-to-face encounters. Because we are "holy partners in a heavenly calling" (Hebrews 3:1), these encounters should lead to

genuine partnership in the gospel between Christians North and South.

Finally, we will have to learn to give gladly. Jenkins points out that the average Southern Christian is hungry! But as purse-strings are loosened, patronizing must end. It is time we abandon the notion that whoever writes the check calls the shots. Not ephemeral



culture but eternal Christ. Not idle curiosity but real *koinonia*. Not patronage but partnership. This is the hopeful future that Christ offers.

I'm taking my example from one of my students, who belongs to the Archdiocese of Rwanda. He is a white American who belongs to a mission congregation in Chicago planted by an African church (a movement Jenkins describes.) His response, like most of our students here at North Park Theological Seminary, is to worship and to study, to pray and to serve, to receive the gospel with thanksgiving and to share it with joy. That is always the Christian response, not to "the coming of global Christianity" or to any other event in the time between the times, but to the coming (and coming again) of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. □