

## **Toward A Global Christianity: A Review of Philip Jenkins's *The Next Christendom***

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There are many different views on what Christianity is and what it will look like in the future. For William and J.M. McNeill, who see man as little more than an animal that developed into a highly intelligent species over millions of years, Christianity, or any religion for that matter, is merely an invention used to endure the trials of this life. In other words, religion is an opiate for the masses. On the other hand, Kenneth Pomeranz and Steven Topik barely discussed the importance of religion in the global and cultural context. In their opinion, trade is what affects culture; whether it be through the exchange of ideas or resources. However, Philip Jenkins takes a different but fair and well researched view in his book *The Next Christendom*. Jenkins discusses Western and the emerging Southern form of Christianity as well as what both look like. He also challenges the view that Christianity is on the decline, and explains why it is still the largest global religion.

The history of the growth of Western Christianity is long and complicated, but Jenkins breaks it down clearly and succinctly. One reason Christianity spread so quickly through the western hemisphere is its portable nature. The McNeill's used this term to discuss the characteristics of religions which were adaptable to different cultures. Christianity and Islam both share this characteristic, and it is for this reason, says Jenkins, they have both spread so far and quickly. A further reason for Christianities growth is Western imperialism. With both America and Europe, especially England, colonizing areas in South America, Asia, and Africa, the peoples of these continents came into contact with the Christian faith on a number of levels. Some had the experience of being brutally forced to believe, while others came into contact with

one of two kinds of Western missionaries. The first type was those who were kind and desirous of adopting the surrounding culture as their own. The other kind came because they believed it to be their duty to bring the light of Christ and Western culture to ignorant and less fortunate races.

Because Western imperialism and Christianity were so closely associated, people thought that with the decline of imperialism, Christianity would follow close behind. However, this is not the case. Rather than Christianity waning, it continues to grow at alarming rates. Many people would react skeptically to a phrase like this due to the lack of people in church on Sunday mornings in American and Europe. If there are people in church, especially the more conservative ones, they are usually elderly. How then can Jenkins make such a claim? The reason is found in the fact that the center of Global Christianity has not weakened, rather it has shifted. Even though Western churches appear to be weakening, churches in Asia, South America, and Africa are growing by leaps and bounds.

Surprisingly, one of the reasons for this is Imperialism itself. With all the encounters other nations had with western culture and its missionaries, and given the portable nature of Christianity, it is not surprising. Local peoples were able to take the doctrines of the Christian faith and apply them to their local cultures. Furthermore, Southern Christianity is prevalent in places where the spiritual realm has a prominent place in their cultures. Scripture speaks of the Holy Spirit and spiritual warfare, which is something these cultures see and deal with every day. This is also the reason why many of these southern churches are Pentecostal. Another reason for growth is the urbanization. People in these centers were poor and had growing feelings of estrangement and disconnectedness. Christianity gave these people stability and unity where nationalism would not. Finally, Christianity filled the social needs of the people. There was no distinguishing between men and women, nor were there racial distinctions. All men are equal in

God's sight no matter what a person's social or economic status was.

With this growth in southern Christianity and the various cultures that surround it, some westerners fear what it might turn into. Rather than letting culture be shaped by the Christian faith, they fear that the opposite will happen. There were people in a region in South America who took only elements of the Christian faith and mixed them with their own traditions. What resulted was not recognizable to Scriptural Christianity. However, Jenkins writes that this fear is unfounded. There are things in the western culture that cause Christians to miss out on important things elements of the faith. For instance, western Christians have a tough time recognizing the presence and the significant influence of the spiritual realm. This causes them to deemphasize the power of the Holy Spirit who is co-equal and co-eternal with the Father and Son. On the other hand, southern Christians have no such problem with this. The Holy Spirit plays a huge role in their lives and in their worship. Jenkins goes on to say that despite what some people may say, Christianity in the south is usually conservative and orthodox as well as open to the supernatural.

Jenkins does well at severing the relationship between Christianity and western culture with its imperialistic undertones. He presents a fair and balanced perspective of Christianity by showing how not everything it stood for was good. The crusades, for instance, and the violent coercion to accepting the faith implemented on many southern people. However, he also discusses the good things that Christianity did. To put it more accurately, Jenkins does not look at the faith as something which is good or bad. He knows what Christianity is supposed to represent. Instead, he talks about the humans who confessed this faith and the failings they succumbed to. Therefore, unlike the idea that faith is merely an opiate or a cultural projection, Jenkins demonstrates how people were drawn to the faith because it was something they believed to be true. It was not merely a means to endure suffering, although Christianity does enable

people to persevere through trials, nor is Christianity an invention. Multiple times Jenkins demonstrates how Christianity shapes cultures and people rather than it merely being the people who adopt certain parts of the faith in order to adapt it to their own culture.

Even though neither the McNeill's nor Topik and Pomeranz give Christianity the accurate portrayal that Jenkins does, their respective books have something important for people to learn. Like Jenkins, the McNeill's attempt to take the spotlight off of Europe and challenge the western way of thinking. Contrary to what people would like to think, Europe was not always ahead of everyone else when it came to progress and industrialization. China had invented gun powder centuries before Europeans discovered it. Furthermore, China had also developed a market society while Europe was still using the barter system. Topik and Pomeranz do something similar in their book, but they focus on how European culture was affected as much as other cultures due to trade and commerce. Jenkins uses the scope of religion to take the spotlight off of Europe and direct it to what is happening to Christianity from the southern perspective.