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Title In the Forecast: Global Christianity Alive and Well

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Abstract Review of *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (2007), by Philip Jenkins.

IN THE FORECAST: GLOBAL CHRISTIANITY ALIVE AND WELL

Ted Lyon

Review of Philip Jenkins. *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. xiii + 316 pp., with maps and index. \$14.95 paperback.

God is not dead, and neither is Christianity. But Christian faith is rapidly being transformed as it moves south! And not just for the winter—it'll stay there for a long time. Phillip Jenkins, Distinguished Professor of History and Religious Studies at Pennsylvania State University,¹ advances a simple and direct thesis: that Christianity is growing, not shrinking, and that Africa, Asia, and Latin America are now replacing Europe as the geographic center of world Christianity. He projects that by the year 2050 only 20 percent of the world's Christians will live in Europe and the United States; he also projects that by midcentury, when world population will have grown to some 9 billion, a third of the total, or 3 billion people, will be Christians. While the percentage of Christians in the world will remain relatively unchanged (there are currently about 2 billion Christians in a world population of 6.3 billion), the geographic center will shift to southern climes.

1. Jenkins has published some ten or twelve books on contemporary religious topics, including *Hidden Gospels: How the Search for Jesus Lost Its Way* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); *The New Anti-Catholicism: The Last Acceptable Prejudice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); and *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Perhaps the subtitle of this book—“The Coming of Global Christianity”—is a bit sensationalist, even misleading. Jenkins does not project the idea of the Christian religions sweeping the entire world in some massive global crusade, nor does his use of the rather archaic term *Christendom* elicit the same meanings it did during medieval times. There will be no heavily armored knights marching across the globe with swords unsheathed. But Christianity, he argues, will continue to flourish and expand, especially in Africa and South Asia. For example, in the year 1900 there were only 10 million Christians in Africa. By 2000 some 360 million Africans had identified themselves as Christians; by the year 2050 the number will likely increase to 1 billion! The center of Christianity will no longer be Europe. Instead, the center will shift, and by the landmark year Jenkins uses to measure change, the year 2050, only one in five Christians will be non-Hispanic white. The “new face” of Christianity will be decidedly darker.

Latin America, of course, is already Christian and Catholic, but Jenkins projects a change from mildly passive, nominal Catholicism to more energetic, charismatic denominations, noting that in the economically progressive country of Chile, for example, more than 20 percent of the population is already evangelical, active, and highly participative. Even in a more traditional country like Guatemala, charismatic Christianity is expanding rapidly, flourishing in the tiniest hamlets as well as in urban centers. From my own studies, I calculate that there are likely more participating, “churched” non-Catholics than active Catholics in both of these countries. In short, Roman Catholicism is weakening, but Protestant Christianity is thriving.

Many of Jenkins’s statistics may shock the reader. For example:

1. “The annual baptismal totals for Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of the Congo are each higher than those for such familiar Catholic lands as Italy, France, Spain, and Poland” (pp. 194–95).
2. “There are [only] half as many Catholics in the whole of the Netherlands as in (say) just the Manila metropolitan area” (p. 198).
3. “In absolute terms, there are more Christians in the People’s Republic [of China] than in either France or Great Britain” (p. 70).

In this dynamic sea change, it seems that the United States will be an anomaly. The “southerners” are coming north—the flood of Hispanic immigrants bolsters and renovates the still-dynamic Catholic Church in the United States, as well as provides millions of converts to U.S. Protestant and evangelical congregations. Yet even without the influx of Hispanics, the United States has stood out as the exception to the European norm that economic prosperity generally spawns religious passivity. Indeed, Roger Finke and Rodney Stark have convincingly demonstrated that from its inception 230 years ago, the United States has become more “churched,” more religiously active, and not less participative.² As North America has prospered, so has religion. Jenkins confirms this analysis. He charts the largest Christian communities over a period of fifty years (numbers are in millions):

Nation	2000	2025	2050
United States	225	270	330
Brazil	164	190	195
Mexico	95	127	145
Philippines	77	116	145
Nigeria	50	83	123

By every measure the United States seems destined to continue as the largest single Christian country in the world.

Jenkins seems unsure how to handle the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints within the United States and indeed throughout the entire world. He presumes it to be “independent” from general Christianity (see p. 60). Later he notes that many “hard-line Northern observers would consider [Mormonism] only a semi-Christian movement,” but he offers little definition for what a “semi-Christian” religion would be (p. 66). He hardly even counts Latter-day Saints, since worldwide the number of Latter-day Saints is still rather small in comparison to Protestant Christians. Jenkins does briefly explain why

2. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 23.

many religious denominations find it difficult to accept Mormons as Christians: the use of additional scriptures and various unique doctrines not shared by other Christian religions (see p. 86).

Jenkins sets out some present and possible future religious conflicts, especially the current clashes between dynamic Christianity and crusading Islamic fundamentalism in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. For followers of Muhammad, “Babylon” is now the symbol for the West, and Baghdad, Damascus, and Tehran are the spiritual centers, almost akin to a “Zion.” He believes that this tension between Islam and the West will increase in relation to population and geographical expansion. Jenkins is optimistic, perhaps too much so, that Islam and Christianity can somehow coexist. But he projects that tensions will worsen by 2050, when Islam will likely boast 2 billion adherents to Christianity’s 3 billion. His summary of these possible future conflicts leaves the question of religious coexistence for other scholars to sort out.

Jenkins argues that the new world Christendom will be poorer as it expands through Africa and South America. Christ’s doctrines appeal more to the hungry masses than to those with full bellies. Jenkins’s recent book *The New Faces of Christianity* explores the relationship between poverty and religion with innovative analysis supported by statistics. The new Christianity will not only appeal to the poor, but it will also become more conservative, emphasizing personal revelation, angelic visitations, and the presence of many prophets. It will become more syncretic, as the example of the Virgin of Guadalupe demonstrates. Her story began in a tiny town near Mexico City, but she now transcends her country of origin and has become the patron saint of all Latin America. Similar mixes of local myths and apparitions will infuse the new Christianity with vitality and may even become the norm, according to Jenkins’s projections. These charismatic elements will then manifest themselves in the United States as well as in the South. Jenkins also projects considerable splintering, with more local leaders breaking off from established churches and forming new centers and types of worship in the Southern Hemisphere.

The new Christian church (composed of many denominations) will be an evangelizing, missionary Christendom, but not only in the South—thousands of missionaries will, he imagines, come from Africa, Asia, and South America to reclaim and return the apostate North to Christ. As a harbinger, Jenkins notes that in 2002 there were already fifteen hundred foreign missionaries teaching and preaching in Great Britain alone, hailing from fifty nations! Evangelizing the North will only increase in future decades. Christianity will survive, transformed and vibrant.

