

BOOK REVIEW: *THE NEXT CHRISTENDOM – THE COMING OF GLOBAL CHRISTIANITY*

Eric Schering

Eric Schering (MDiv, DMin), and his wife Penny, currently serve with Pacific Island Ministries in East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea.

Eric served as a pastor in the USA for 17 years, and also served with Promise Keepers for four years. They have lived and ministered in the Sepik River Valley for six years. Eric is involved in leadership training, and writing resource materials for pastors in PNG.

INTRODUCTION

Philip Jenkins, professor of History and Religious Studies at Penn State University, has written a marvellous book.¹ A phenomenal amount of research has been compiled, and we readers are the beneficiaries. In this masterpiece, Jenkins attempts to describe the shape of Christianity in the next 50 years, with his primary assertion being that the centre of Christianity has shifted southward. To speak of Christianity as Western is rapidly losing validity. The huge influx of Latin American, African, and Asian believers has changed the religious landscape.

CRITIQUE

Jenkins has great depth and breadth of knowledge of the religious events of the past century, and does an excellent job projecting likely religious scenarios in the future. He's correct when he asserts that the Southern form of Christianity is more vigorous, and more conservative, than its counterpart in the north.

¹ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 2002, ISBN 0195146166.

His research on Great Britain is fascinating. He describes a mega-church in London, pastored by an African, who has publicly expressed his opinion that the Anglican church in England should die gracefully, and give all their resources and facilities to ministries, such as his. Jenkins states that less-developed countries have sent an impressive 1,500 missionaries to Great Britain, a pattern which will likely increase in the upcoming years, and will have a great impact on the island. He speaks freely of the need for Europe to be evangelised. According to Jenkins, the USA will not be impacted as much by Southern missionaries, due to the fact that a certain measure of spiritual vitality can still be found in American churches.

Jenkins is weak in his analysis and projections on China, and, to a limited extent, on India. He calculates that currently China has some 60 million believers (counting only those in the state church), and expects that his figure will remain unchanged for the next 45 years. What he seems to overlook is that the church in China is experiencing an astounding growth rate, between 14,000 to 28,000 believers a day (5-10 million per year) and shows no sign of slowing down. By 2025, China could easily have 130 million in the state church, and another 70 million house church believers.

Among the four major religions of the world, Jenkins believes that Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism will continue to experience growth. His assertion on India is that Hinduism will grow to about 1.2 billion adherents by the year 2050. Jenkins makes an insightful comment, when he states that Hinduism has some serious issues, with respect to long-term growth, the most prominent being the systemic discrimination against the Dalits, the untouchables of the Hindu caste system. Despite this problem, Jenkins inexplicably anticipates the continued growth of Hinduism. I would argue that, with the growth of Hinduism slowing, and, in light of the significant inroads of the Christian faith among the 150-250 million Dalits, Hinduism will remain at the current 800 million mark, or will decrease in numbers.

With respect to the fourth major religion, Jenkins anticipates a resurgence in Buddhism. He states that Buddhism is currently at a low ebb, claiming only five percent of the loyalty of the world's people, whereas, in 1900, the figure

stood at 20 percent. He envisions a Buddhist awakening in China, Vietnam, and Thailand, resulting in a significant uptick in the number of worldwide adherents of Buddhism. However, with little or no current evidence of Buddhist renewal, it seems probable that Buddhism will continue to lose ground.

Jenkins' greatest strength is his analysis on Muslim/Christian tensions of past and future. He projects that, in the next 45 years, there will be outbreaks of fighting, especially in nations, such as Indonesia, where Muslims are in the majority, and Christians constitute a significant minority. In that regard, things do not bode well for Pakistan's three million Christians, who comprise two percent of that country's population. Secondly, we can expect turbulence in those countries (e.g., Nigeria, Ivory Coast) that are roughly split, with respect to Muslim and Christian populations.

Thirdly, religious hostilities can be anticipated in those countries, such as the Philippines, which have a Christian majority, but Muslims claim a sizeable minority. I think Jenkins is on target when he states that, based on past hostilities, we can expect that Muslims will often be the aggressors. Generally speaking, Christians haven't been nearly as violent toward Muslims, as vice versa. He is on track – sad to say – when he points out that it doesn't take much to incite Muslim/Christian hostilities, even in those areas of the world where religious détente has existed for long periods of time.

I question Jenkins' statistics, with respect to what constitutes a Christian. He asserts 560 million Christians live in Europe, when the actual number of those regularly worshipping is somewhere between 50-100 million. Christianity is dying in many parts of Europe, though, as Jenkins states, there is hope, due to the number of Southern missionaries reaching out to the continent.

Jenkins is helpful, when he describes the character of Southern Christianity. Believers from the South have much greater expectation of God performing

miracles to meet their urgent needs. In addition, there is the anticipation of transformation. What drives Brazilian men to come to worship, more than anything else, is the desire for healing from alcoholism.

He is also on track when he surmises that Christians in the South have been, and will continue to be, more conservative in their understanding of scripture, and the daily practice of their faith. Disappointing is Jenkins' hopefulness that the day will come when Southern churches will open their doors to clergy, who are practising homosexuals.

Jenkins' sense of balance is remarkable, as he is neither optimistic nor pessimistic, concerning the future of Christianity. He expects that Christianity will continue to grow significantly, though with a decided Southern flavour. At the same time, he is fully aware that Christians can expect persecution in the coming decades, primarily at the hands of Muslims.

CONCLUSION

Overall, Jenkins makes a fine contribution to enrich our understanding of what God has done, and will continue to do, around the world. His sound research, and willingness to make projections, is of service to mission organisations, who are constantly involved in strategising how they can best utilise the resources they have been given.