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The Christian Revolution

Philip Jenkins

[...] We are currently living through one of the transforming moments in the history of religion worldwide. Over the past five centuries or so, the story of Christianity has been inextricably bound up with that of Europe and European-derived civilizations overseas, above all in North America. Until recently, the overwhelming majority of Christians have lived in White nations, allowing theorists to speak smugly, arrogantly, of "European Christian" civilization. Conversely, radical writers have seen Christianity as an ideological arm of Western imperialism. Many of us share the stereotype of Christianity as the religion of the "West" or, to use another popular metaphor, the global North. It is self-evidently the religion of the haves. To adapt the phrase once applied to the increasingly conservative US electorate of the 1970s, the stereotype holds that Christians are un-Black, un-poor, and un-young. If that is true, then the growing secularization of the West can only mean that Christianity is in its dying days. Globally, the faith of the future must be Islam.

Over the past century, however, the center of gravity in the Christian world has shifted inexorably southward, to Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Already today, the largest Christian communities on the planet are to be found in Africa and Latin America. If we want to visualize a "typical" contemporary Christian, we should think of a woman living in a village in Nigeria or in a Brazilian *favela*. As Kenyan scholar John Mbiti has observed, "the centers of the church's universality [are] no longer in Geneva, Rome, Athens, Paris, London, New York, but Kinshasa, Buenos Aires, Addis Ababa and Manila." Whatever Europeans or North Americans may believe, Christianity is doing very well indeed in the global South – not just surviving but expanding.

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This trend will continue apace in coming years. Many of the fastest-growing countries in the world are either predominantly Christian or else have very sizable Christian minorities. Even if Christians just maintain their present share of the population in countries like Nigeria and Kenya, Mexico and Ethiopia, Brazil and the Philippines, there are soon going to be several hundred million more Christians from those nations alone. Moreover, conversions will swell the Christian share of world population. Meanwhile, historically low birth rates in the traditionally Christian states of Europe mean that these populations are declining or stagnant. In 1950, a list of the world's leading Christian countries would have included Britain, France, Spain, and Italy, but none of these names would be represented in a corresponding list for 2050.

Christianity should enjoy a worldwide boom in the new century, but the vast majority of believers will be neither white nor European, nor Euro-American. According to the respected *World Christian Encyclopedia*, some 2 billion Christians are alive today, about one-third of the planetary total. The largest single bloc, some 560 million people, is still to be found in Europe. Latin America, though, is already close behind with 480 million. Africa has 360 million, and 313 million Asians profess Christianity. North America claims about 260 million believers. If we extrapolate these figures to the year 2025, and assume no great gains or losses through conversion, then there would be around 2.6 billion Christians, of whom 633 million would live in Africa, 640 million in Latin America, and 460 million in Asia. Europe, with 555 million, would have slipped to third place. Africa and Latin America would be in competition for the title of most Christian continent. About this date, too, another significant milestone should occur, namely that these two continents will together account for half the Christians on the planet. By 2050, only about one-fifth of the world's 3 billion Christians will be non-Hispanic Whites. Soon, the phrase "a White Christian" may sound like a curious oxymoron, as mildly surprising as "a Swedish Buddhist." Such people can exist, but a slight eccentricity is implied.

This global perspective should make us think carefully before asserting "what Christians believe" or "how the church is changing." All too often, statements about what "modern Christians accept" or what "Catholics today believe" refer only to what that ever-shrinking remnant of *Western* Christians and Catholics believe. Such assertions are outrageous today, and as time goes by they will become ever further removed from reality. The era of Western Christianity has passed within our lifetimes, and the day of Southern Christianity is dawning. The fact of change itself is undeniable: it has happened, and will continue to happen. So little did we notice this momentous change that it was barely mentioned in all the media hoopla surrounding the end of the second millennium. [...]

But what would [a] new Christian synthesis look like? One obvious fact is that at least for the foreseeable future, members of a Southern-dominated church are likely to be among the poorer people on the planet, in marked contrast to the older Western-dominated world. For this reason, some Western Christians have since the 1960s expected that the religion of their Third World brethren would be fervently liberal, activist, and even revolutionary, the model represented by liberation theology. In this view, the new Christianity would chiefly be concerned with putting down the mighty from their seats, through political action or even armed struggle. All too often, though, these hopes have proved illusory. Frequently, the liberationist voices

emanating from the Third World proved to derive from clerics trained in Europe and North America, and their ideas won only limited local appeal. Southern Hemisphere Christians would not avoid political activism, but they would become involved strictly on their own terms.

At present, the most immediately apparent difference between the older and newer churches is that Southern Christians are far more conservative in terms of both beliefs and moral teaching. The denominations that are triumphing all across the global South are stalwartly traditional or even reactionary by the standards of the economically advanced nations. The churches that have made most dramatic progress in the global South have either been Roman Catholic, of a traditionalist and fideistic kind, or radical Protestant sects, evangelical or Pentecostal. Indeed, this conservatism may go far toward explaining the common neglect of Southern Christianity in North America and Europe. Western experts rarely find the ideological tone of the new churches much to their taste.

Southern Christians retain a very strong supernatural orientation, and are by and large far more interested in personal salvation than in radical politics. As Harvey Cox showed in *Fire from Heaven*, Pentecostal expansion across the Southern Hemisphere has been so astonishing as to justify claims of a new reformation. In addition, rapid growth is occurring in non-traditional denominations that adapt Christian belief to local tradition, groups that are categorized by titles like "African indigenous churches." Their exact numbers are none too clear, since they are too busy baptizing newcomers to be counting them very precisely. By most accounts, membership in Pentecostal and independent churches already runs into the hundreds of millions, and congregations are located in precisely the regions of fastest population growth. Within a few decades, such denominations will represent a far larger segment of global Christianity, and just conceivably a majority. These newer churches preach deep personal faith and communal orthodoxy, mysticism and puritanism, all founded on clear scriptural authority. They preach messages that, to a Westerner, appear simplistically charismatic, visionary, and apocalyptic. In this thought-world, prophecy is an everyday reality, while faith-healing, exorcism, and dream-visions are all basic components of religious sensibility. For better or worse, the dominant churches of the future could have much in common with those of medieval or early modern European times. On present evidence, a Southernized Christian future should be distinctly conservative.

The theological coloring of the most successful new churches reminds us once more of the massive gap in most Western listings of the major trends of the past century, which rightly devoted much space to political movements like fascism and communism, but ignored vital religious currents like Pentecostalism. Yet today, Fascists or Nazis are not easy to find, and Communists may be becoming an endangered species, while Pentecostals are flourishing around the globe. Since there were only a handful of Pentecostals in 1900, and several hundred million today, is it not reasonable to identify this as perhaps the most successful social movement of the past century? According to current projections, the number of Pentecostal believers should surpass the one billion mark before 2050. In terms of the global religions, there will by that point be roughly as many Pentecostals as Hindus, and twice as many as there are Buddhists. And that is just taking one of the diverse currents of rising Christianity: there will be even more Catholics than Pentecostals. [...]

The Rise of Christendom

In describing the rising neo-orthodox world, I have spoken of a "new Christendom." The phrase evokes a medieval European age of faith, of passionate spirituality and a pervasive Christian culture. Medieval people spoke readily of "Christendom," the *Res Publica Christiana*, as a true overarching unity and a focus of loyalty transcending mere kingdoms or empires. Kingdoms like Burgundy, Wessex, or Saxony might last for only a century or two before they were replaced by new states and dynasties, but any rational person knew that Christendom simply endured. This perception had political consequences. While the laws of individual nations lasted only as long as the nations themselves, Christendom offered a higher set of standards and mores, which alone could claim to be universal. Although it rarely possessed any potential for common political action, Christendom was a primary form of cultural reference.

Ultimately, Christendom collapsed in the face of the overwhelming power of secular nationalism. Later Christian scholars struggled to live in this new age of "post-Christendom," when one could no longer assume any connection between religion and political order. By the start of the 21st century, however, the whole concept of the nation-state was itself under challenge. Partly, the changes reflected new technologies. According to a report by the US intelligence community, in the coming decades, "governments will have less and less control over flows of information, technology, diseases, migrants, arms, and financial transactions, whether legal or illegal, across their borders. … The very concept of 'belonging' to a particular state will probably erode." To use Benedict Anderson's famous phrase, nation-states are imagined communities of relatively recent date, rather than eternal or inevitable realities. In recent years, many of these communities have begun to reimagine themselves substantially, even to unimagine themselves out of existence. In Europe, loyalties to the nation as such are being replaced by newer forms of adherence, whether to larger entities (Europe itself) or to smaller (regions or ethnic groups). It remains to be seen whether or not the nation-state will outlive the printed book, that other Renaissance invention that may also fade away in the coming decades. If even once unquestioned constructs like Great Britain are under threat, it is not surprising that people are questioning the existence of newer and still more artificial entities in Africa or Asia, with their flimsy national frontiers dreamed up so recently by imperial bureaucrats. As Paul Gifford notes, many Africans live in mere quasi-states: "though they are recognized legal entities, they are not, in a functional sense, states."

For a quarter of a century, social scientists have been analyzing the decline of states in the face of globalization, and have noted parallels with the cosmopolitan world of the Middle Ages. Some scholars have postulated the future emergence of some movement or ideology that could in a sense create something like a new Christendom. This would be what political scientist Hedley Bull called "a modern and secular equivalent of the kind of universal political organization that existed in Western Christendom in the Middle Ages." Might the new ideological force be environmentalism, perhaps with a mystical New Age twist? Yet the more we look at the Southern Hemisphere in particular, the more we see that while universal and supranational ideas are flourishing, they are not secular in the least. The centers of gravest state weakness are often

the regions in which political loyalties are secondary to religious beliefs, either Muslim or Christian, and these are the terms in which people define their identities. The new Christian world of the South could find unity in common religious beliefs.

That many Southern societies will develop a powerful Christian identity in culture and politics is beyond doubt. Less obvious is whether, and when, they will aspire to any kind of global unity. In this matter, the Atlantic Ocean initially seems to offer a barrier quite as overwhelming as it was before Columbus. Very soon, the two main centers of Christianity will be Africa and Latin America, and within each region, there is at least some sense of unity. Latin American ecclesiastics meet periodically, scholars treat the region as a whole (albeit a diverse one), and a similar canon of authors is read widely. The same can be said of Africa in its own way. However, next to no common sense of identity currently unites the churches and believers of the two continents. Even in terms of worldwide Christian networks, the two continents belong almost to different planets. For many Protestant Africans, the World Council of Churches offers a major institutional focus of unity, but because the Roman Catholic Church abstains from membership in the Council, this forum is closed to the majority of Latin Americans. When African and Latin American church leaders and scholars do meet, all too often it is at gatherings in Europe or the United States, following agendas conceived in the global North.

The resulting segregation of interests and ideas is remarkable, since the churches in Africa and Latin America share so many common experiences. They are passing through similar phases of growth, and are, independently, developing similar social and theological worldviews. Both also face similar issues, of race, of inculturation, of just how to deal with their respective colonial heritages. All these are common hemispheric issues that fundamentally separate the experiences of Northern and Southern churches. Given the lively scholarly activity and the flourishing spirituality in both Africa and Latin America, a period of mutual discovery is inevitable. When it begins – when, not if – the interaction should launch a revolutionary new era in world religion. Although many see the process of globalization as yet another form of American imperialism, it would be ironic if an early consequence was a growing sense of identity between Southern Christians. Once that axis is established, we really would be speaking of a new Christendom, based in the Southern Hemisphere. [...]

Looking at Southern Christianity gives a surprising new perspective on some other things that might seem to be very familiar. Perhaps the most striking example is how the newer churches can read the Bible in a way that makes that Christianity look like a wholly different religion from the faith of prosperous advanced societies of Europe or North America. We have already seen that Southern churches are quite at home with biblical notions of the supernatural, with ideas like dreams and prophecy. Just as relevant in their eyes are that book's core social and political themes, like martyrdom, oppression, and exile. In the present day, it may be that it is only in the newer churches that the Bible can be read with any authenticity and immediacy, and that the Old Christendom must give priority to Southern voices. If Northern churches cannot help with clergy or missionaries or money, then perhaps they can reinterpret their own religion in light of these experiences.

When we read the New Testament, so many of the basic assumptions seem just as alien in the global North as they do normal and familiar in the South. When

Jesus was not talking about exorcism and healing, his recorded words devoted what today seems like an inordinate amount of attention to issues of persecution and martyrdom. He talked about what believers should do when on trial for the faith, how they should respond when expelled and condemned by families, villages, and Jewish religious authorities. A large proportion of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, addresses the sufferings of God's people in the face of evil secular authorities.

As an intellectual exercise, modern Westerners can understand the historical circumstances that led to this emphasis on bloodshed and confrontation, but the passages concerned have little current relevance. Nor, for many, do the apocalyptic writings that are so closely linked to the theme of persecution and martyrdom, the visions of a coming world in which God will rule, persecutors will perish, and the righteous be vindicated. In recent decades, some New Testament scholars have tried to undermine the emphasis on martyrdom and apocalyptic in the New Testament by suggesting that these ideas did not come from Jesus' mouth, but were rather attributed to him by later generations. The real Jesus, in this view, was a rational Wisdom teacher much more akin to modern Western tastes, a kind of academic gadfly, rather than the ferocious "Doomsday Jesus" of the Synoptic Gospels. From this perspective, Jesus' authentic views are reflected in mystical texts like the *Gospel of Thomas*. For radical Bible critics like the Jesus Seminar, *Thomas* has a much better claim to be included in a revised New Testament than the book of Revelation, which is seen as a pernicious distortion of Christian truth.

For the average Western audience, New Testament passages about standing firm in the face of pagan persecution have little immediate relevance, about as much perhaps as farmyard images of threshing or vine-grafting. Some fundamentalists imagine that the persecutions described might have some future reality, perhaps during the End Times. But for millions of Southern Christians, there is no such need to dig for arcane meanings. Millions of Christians around the world do in fact live in constant danger of persecution or forced conversion, from either governments or local vigilantes. For modern Christians in Nigeria, Egypt, the Sudan, or Indonesia, it is quite conceivable that they might someday find themselves before a tribunal that would demand that they renounce their faith upon pain of death. In all these varied situations, ordinary believers are forced to understand why they are facing these sufferings, and repeatedly they do so in the familiar language of the Bible and of the earliest Christianity. To quote one Christian in Maluku, recent massacres and expulsions in that region are "according to God's plan. Christians are under purification from the Lord." The church in Sudan, the victim of perhaps the most savage religious repression anywhere in the world, has integrated its sufferings into its liturgy and daily practice, and produced some moving literature in the process ("Death has come to reveal the faith / It has begun with us and it will end with us"). Churches everywhere preach death and resurrection, but nowhere else are these realities such an immediate prospect. As in several other crisis regions, the oppressors in Sudan are Muslim, but elsewhere, they might be Christians of other denominations. In Guatemala or Rwanda, as in the Sudan, martyrdom is not merely a subject for historical research, it is a real prospect. As we move into the new century, the situation is likely to get worse rather than better.

situations when actual violence might not have occurred for months or years, there is a pervasive sense of threat, a need to be alert and avoid provocations. Hundreds of millions of Christians live in deeply divided societies, constantly needing to be acutely aware of their relationships with Muslim or Hindu neighbors. Unlike in the West, difficulties in interfaith relations in these settings do not just raise the danger of some angry letters to local newspapers, but might well lead to bloodshed and massacre. In these societies, New Testament warnings about humility and discretion are not just laudable Christian virtues, they can make the difference between life and death.

Just as relevant to current concerns is exile, forcible removal from one's homeland, which forms the subject of so much of the Hebrew Bible. About half the refugees in the world today are in Africa, and millions of these are Christian. The wars that have swept over the Congo and Central Africa over the past decade have been devastating in uprooting communities. Often, it is the churches that provide the refugees with cohesion and community, and offer them hope, so that exile and return acquire powerfully religious symbolism. Themes of exile and return also exercise a powerful appeal for those removed voluntarily from their homelands, the tens of millions of migrant workers who have sought better lives in the richer lands.

Read against the background of martyrdom and exile, it is not surprising that so many Christians look for promises that their sufferings are only temporary, and that God will intervene directly to save the situation. In this context, the book of Revelation looks like true prophecy on an epic scale, however unpopular or discredited it may be for most Americans or Europeans. In the South, Revelation simply makes sense, in its description of a world ruled by monstrous demonic powers. These forces might be literal servants of Satan, or symbols for evil social forces, but in either case, they are indisputably real. To quote one Latin American liberation theologian, Néstor Míguez, "The repulsive spirits of violence, racial hatred, mutilation, and exploitation roam the streets of our Babylons in Latin America (and the globe); their presence is clear once one looks behind the glimmering lights of the neon signs."

Making the biblical text sound even more relevant to modern Third World Christians, the evils described in Revelation are distinctively urban. Then as now, evil sets up its throne in cities. Brazilian scholar Gilberto da Silva Gorgulho remarks that "The Book of Revelation is the favorite book of our popular communities. Here they find the encouragement they need in their struggle, and a criterion for the interpretation of official persecution in our society. … The meaning of the church in history is rooted in the witness of the gospel before the state imperialism that destroys the people's life, looming as an idol and caricature of the Holy Trinity." To a Christian living in a Third World dictatorship, the image of the government as Antichrist is not a bizarre religious fantasy, but a convincing piece of political analysis. Looking at Christianity as a planetary phenomenon, not merely a Western one, makes it impossible to read the New Testament in quite the same way ever again. The Christianity we see through this exercise looks like a very exotic beast indeed, intriguing, exciting, and a little frightening.

Christianity is flourishing wonderfully among the poor and persecuted, while it atrophies among the rich and secure. Using the traditional Marxist view of religion as the

opium of the masses, it would be tempting to draw the conclusion that the religion actually does have a connection to underdevelopment and pre-modern cultural ways, and will disappear as society progresses. That conclusion would be fatuous, though, because very enthusiastic kinds of Christianity are also succeeding among professional and highly technologically oriented groups, notably around the Pacific Rim and in the United States. Yet the distribution of modern Christians might well show that the religion does succeed best when it takes very seriously the profound pessimism about the secular world that characterizes the New Testament. If it is not exactly a faith based on the experience of poverty and persecution, then at least it regards these things as normal and expected elements of life. [...]