

BOOK REVIEWS

Philip Jenkins

*The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global
Christianity*

New York: Oxford University Press, 2002, US\$28

The message of Philip Jenkins' *The Next Christendom* will come as no surprise to the readers of *AJET*: the emerging Christian communities in the "southern" parts of the world—Latin America, Africa, and Asia—are larger, more dynamic, and making more of an impact on the world than the older Christian communities of the West, primarily in Europe and North America. Jenkins is Distinguished Professor of History and Religious Studies at Penn State University in the United States. One of the most significant contributions of his book is that he provides the historical and sociological data to document what church leaders, theologians and missionaries in Africa, Latin America and Asia have long known about the size and impact of the churches of the Two Thirds world.

Jenkins is not primarily writing to a theological or even a religious audience. He is writing to anyone who is interested in the direction in which our world is moving. Most people in our world, especially the political and religious policy makers in the West, still think of Christianity as primarily a Western phenomena. If the Christian Church has any impact on the world at large, they assume, it is the Western church that is making the impact. Jenkins writes to awaken them. By far the majority of the world's Christians now live in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and their numbers are growing far faster than the numbers of Christians in Europe and North America. Using demographic data, Jenkins demonstrates that by 2050 seven of the ten largest Christian nations in the world will be in the "South" (Jenkins term to describe Africa, Latin America, and Asia). He thus agrees with John Mbiti's assessment that "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" (2).

After initially demonstrating that the center of gravity of world Christianity has shifted to the South, Jenkins disproves the idea that through history Christianity has primarily been a Western religion. In a brief but excellent survey of early and medieval church history in Africa and Asia, Jenkins demonstrates that Christianity did not become a primarily European phenomenon until well into medieval times. "At the time of the Magna Carta or the Crusades, if we imagine a typical Christian, we should still be thinking not of a French artisan, but of a Syrian peasant or Mesopotamian towns-dweller, an Asian not a European" (24). Christianity's profile as a non-Western religion is a return to a condition that lasted for well over a thousand years.

But the primary focus of Jenkins' book is an exploration of the *significance* of the growth and impact of "southern" Christianity. Jenkins points out that the **younger churches of the Two-Thirds world by and large** put a stronger emphasis on the Bible, conservative ethics, and issues of spiritual power and charismatic gifts than churches in North America or Europe. The church of the South is also primarily poor and either persecuted or living in a situation in which they are in conflict with other great world religions. "Millions of Christians around the world do in fact live in constant danger of persecution or forced conversion, from either governments or local vigilantes" (218), or have become refugees, both in Islamic & Hindu contexts. Jenkins particularly explores the potential for a coming clash between the emerging Christendom of the South and Islam. "The future centers of global population are chiefly in countries which are already divided between the two great religions, and where divisions are likely to intensify" (161). Jenkins feels that the possibility of a future clash between Islam and Third World Christianity is strong.

Jenkins is primarily writing to a Western audience, and he projects that the distinctives of the church in the Two Thirds World will be increasingly misunderstood by Westerners. "Western policy makers have never excelled in understanding Islam, but perhaps the great political unknown of the new century, the powerful international wild card, will be that mysterious non-Western ideology called Christianity . . . The Christian faith of the rising states, we will probably hear, is fanatical, superstitious, [and] demagogic: it is politically reactionary and sexually repressive (162). While he may have overstated the case for a vastly distinctive brand of Christianity that will not be understood or accepted by Western Christians, Jenkins is clearly on to

something here. As Western Christianity becomes more “Western” and less biblically “Christian,” one is tempted to wonder whether Western Christians will find themselves more comfortable with the values and company of non-Western pagans than with their brothers and sisters in the Two Thirds World Church.

Jenkins’ book is not without flaws. He overemphasizes the religious movements in the South that are theologically and structurally different from those in the West (such as the house church movement in China and the African Initiated Churches) and gives scant attention to the many large, influential churches in Africa, Asia, and Latin America which, while being thoroughly indigenous and contextual, are closely linked to the wider world Christian movement. Jenkins’ projections for the growth of Christianity are strictly based on demographic data, such as birth rates, and take little account of the spiritual dynamic of revival and people movements. For example, he projects little or no church growth in China because the birth rate in China is projected to be level over the next half century. Finally, because he is studying “Christendom,” evangelicals will note that he makes no distinction between Christianity as a movement born from a relationship with the living Lord Jesus and Christianity as a sociological phenomenon.

Nevertheless, Jenkins has carefully documented the large and significant role non-Western Christianity will play in the coming decades. His book is a “must read” for evangelical theological educators in Africa and a “must buy” for theological libraries across the continent.

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Gerald O. West & Musa W. Dube (eds)

***The Bible in Africa: Transactions,
Trajectories, and Trends***

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2000 [ISBN:90-04-10627-8

xvii + 828 pp, hb. \$143.00

This large, diverse, and informative volume of essays is introduced and edited by two highly competent African scholars, Prof. Gerald West of the University of Natal and Prof. Musa Dube of the University of Botswana. The stated aim of their collaborative, interdisciplinary effort is “to present . . . as wide a sense of the presence of the Bible in Africa as possible . . . [and] to give a sense of the breadth and richness of what African biblical scholars are up to (1-2). Although the book offers a far-ranging set of essays on a variety of topics written in depth from many different perspectives, it is not offered as the last word on the subject. Rather, the present text is viewed as merely a first step in what will hopefully be an ongoing interactive process that “will provoke and encourage African scholars to take the task of documenting and analyzing African biblical scholarship further” (2). Thanks to some fine editorial work (it must have been a monumental task!), the Bible in Africa has accomplished its major objectives in admirable form. The standard has now been set for some serious follow-up research and responsive writing, which will undoubtedly include a significant amount of critical “inter-textual conversation”(2) as a positive or negative reaction to different aspects of the impressive array of material that has been assembled in this volume.

Since a review of each of the 38 individual essays (plus an introductory overview) that comprise this monumental work is impossible in the present context, the best I can do is provide some sort of survey of its contents. Rather than to attempt my own inadequate summary of this rich diversity, it may be more precise and informative as well as fairer to the original authors to list their actual assigned titles. Readers can then see all of the topics and evaluate for themselves what may be of interest to them among the many different subjects that have been incorporated within this

extensive compilation. The following listing of titles and authors (in parentheses) is arranged according to the four major topical sections (two having subdivisions) into which the book has been divided. There is quite a bit of overlapping and indeterminacy that is manifested in this categorization, which the editors also recognize (8), but one hesitates to propose an alternative suggestion to the broad topical method that has been chosen (perhaps a geographically-based regional arrangement):

Part One – HISTORICAL AND HERMENEUTICAL PERSPECTIVES: “Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions” (J. Ukpong); “Mapping African Biblical Interpretation: A Tentative Sketch” (G. West); “Old Testament Scholarship in Sub-Saharan Africa North of the Limpopo River” (K. Holter); “New Testament Exegesis in (Modern) Africa” (G. LeMarquand); “How Al-Mokattam Mountain was Moved: The Coptic Imagination and the Christian Bible” (J. Loubser); “The bible in the Black Diaspora: Links with African Christianity” (G. Yorke); “Batswakwa: Which Traveller Are You (John 1:1-18)” (M. Dube); “The Limits of Difference: Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s Redeployment of Biblical Signifiers in *A Grain of Wheat* and *I Will Marry When I Want*” (P. Mwikisa); “(South) Africa, Bible, Criticism: Rhetorics of a Visit” (R. Carrol).

Part Two – PARTICULAR ENCOUNTERS WITH PARTICULAR TEXTS: (Early Encounters) “A Late Seventeenth Century Translation of the Psalms at the Cape” (P. Denis); “Earliest Southern African Biblical Interpretation: The Case of the Bakwena, Bakolo and Bangwato” (F. Nkomazana); “The Role of the Bible in the Rise of African Instituted Churches: The case of the Akurinu Churches in Kenya” (N. Ndung’u); **(North East Africa)** “Cain and Abel in Africa: An Ethiopian Case Study in Competing Hermeneutics” (M. McEntire); **(West Africa)** “The Mother of the Ewe and Firstborn Daughter as the “Good Shepherd” in the Cultural context of the Ewe Peoples: A Liberating Approach” (D. Akoto); “Pouring Libation to Spirit Powers among the Ewe-Dome of Ghana: An Indigenous Religious and Biblical Perspective” (R. Ganusah); “Contextual Balancing of Scripture with Scripture: Scripture Union in Nigeria and Ghana” (A. Igenzo); “The Vernacularization of Scripture and African Beliefs: The Story of the Gerasene Demoniac among the Ewe of West Africa” (S. Avotri); “The Role of the Bible in the Igbo Christianity of Nigeria” (D. Adamo); **(East and Central Africa)** “Cursed Be Everyone Who Hangs on

a Tree: Pastoral Implications of Deuteronomy 21:22-23 and Galatians 3:13 in an African Context” (E. Wabukala & G. LeMarquand); “Nyimbo Za Vijana: Biblical Interpretation in Contemporary Hymns from Tanzania” (F. King); “The Bible in Malawi: A Brief Survey of Its Impact on Society” (H. Mijoga); (**Southern Africa**) “A Setswana Perspective on Genesis 1:1-10” (M. Dibeela); “The Impact of the Bible on Traditional Rain-making Institutions in Western Zimbabwe” (H. Mafu); “The Bishop and the Bricoleur: Bishop John William Colenso’s Commentary on Romans and Magema kaMagwaza Fuze’s The balck People and Whence They Came” (J. Draper).

Part Three – COMPARISON AND TRANSLATION AS TRANSACTION: (Comparative Studies) “Comparative Readings of the Bible in Africa: Some Concerns” (E. Anum); “Corporate Personality in Botswana and Ancient Israel: A Religio-Cultural Comparison” (B. Letlhare); “The Biblical God of the Fathers and the African Ancestors” (T. Mafico); “African Perspectives on P9verty in the Hebrew Law Codes” (R. Wafawanaka); “Ngaka and Jesus as Liberators: A comparative Reading” (G. Ntloedibe); (**Translation Studies**) “The Swahili Bible in East Africa from 1844 to 1996: A Brief Survey with Special Reference to Tanzania” (A. Mojola); “100 Years of the Luganda Bible (1896-1996): A General Survey” (A. Mojola); “Do You Understand What You Are Reading [Hearing] ?” (Acts 8:30): The Translation and Contextualization of Isaiah 52:13-53:12 in Chitonga” (E. Wendland & S. Hachibamba); “The Kiswahili Mwana Wa Mtu and the Greek Ho Huios Tou Anthropou” (J. Loba-Mkole).

Part Four – REWARDING THE BOUNDARIES OF THE BIBLE IN AFRICA: “Africa in the Old Testament” (K. Holter); “Popular Reading of the Bible in Africa and Implications for Academic readings: Report on the Field Research Carried out on Oral Interpretation of the Bible in Port Harcourt Metropolis, Nigeria under the Auspices of the Bible in Africa Project, 1991-94” (J. Ukpong); “Contextual Bible Study in south Africa: A Resource for Regaining Land, Dignity and Identity” (G. West); “To Pray the Lord’s Prayer in the Global Economic Era (Matt. 6:9-13)” (M. Dube).

The book includes an important **Part Five**, “A Bibliography of the Bible in Africa” (G. LeMarquand), which at 160+ pages “is the most comprehensive . . . ever published” (8). There are also three helpful indices

to help readers find their way around this vast volume to particular topics and issues – namely, one for Biblical References, for Names and for Subjects.

Generally speaking, the essays that have been selected for publication in this collect are well written; some are rather more complex and technical than others, but on the whole, they should all be accessible to most African senior seminarians and upper class students in Bible colleges or universities. As indicated in the previous listing of titles, there is a good coverage of different subjects of current interest to African scholars today. Salient topics that might call for somewhat greater consideration, perhaps in a future volume of this nature, include the following: a description, analysis, and critical assessment of various local (vernacular) theologies; a study of certain creative presentations and interpretations of the Scriptures via the non-print media (song, drama, painted art, sculpture, audio rendition, radio, video production); an investigation of the crucial linguistic, dialectal, sociolectal, translational, and ecclesiastical variations that occur during the transmission of setting-specific messages; and research conducted from the bottom-up, that is, surveying popular grass-roots opinion with regard to what the “Bible in Africa” is all about and how effectively people feel the Scriptures are being communicated to them, along with their candid comments concerning the relative success of this ideally interactive hermeneutical process. As far as “ordinary readers” are concerned, to whom this book is dedicated (8), one will also need to find a way of communicating its relevant contents at a level and in a form of language that they can understand and readily dialogue with. At any rate, the editors have implicitly suggested one way of initiating such a program of interaction, at least among scholars and those who will be reading this book, that is, by including e-mail addresses as part of their initial listing of all contributors (xiii -xviii).

This collection of essays is an immensely valuable resources that not only acts as a good entry point for those who wish to survey the vast expanse of biblically-related studies in Africa, but it also provides an excellent model (actually many models) that illustrates how such research may be carried out and related to other work being done in the field. Readers will surely not agree with everything that has been written here, whether in terms of content, method, interpretation or conclusion, but certainly they will all be informed in one way or another, and thus

stimulated to undertake their own investigation in response. Of course, the book should be required reading in theological, missiological, biblical, and hermeneutical departments all over the world, but especially in Africa. This is where we face a significant limiting factor however—namely, the high price of this volume, which may be well beyond the means of many institutions (and even universities!) on the continent. But in this respect too the editors have stated their willingness to try to help out by donating copies of the book to “ecumenical and accessible libraries in Africa” (2; for further information, contact Prof. West at west@nu.ac.za). They are to be congratulated for persevering in their efforts to produce, publish, and promote this extremely useful multi-purpose study text in and for Africa.

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