

BOOK REVIEW: THE NEW FACES OF CHRISTIANITY

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INTRODUCTION

The New Faces of Christianity, by Philip Jenkins, Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 2006, 193 pp., \$26 hardcover.

We are living in a time of incredible harvest worldwide. Not since our Lord Jesus walked this earth, have we seen such a huge influx of humanity ushered into the kingdom. Philip Jenkins, Professor of History and Religious Studies at Penn State University, is an expert on the global expansion of Christianity. In an earlier, and equally-fascinating, book, *The Next Christendom*, Jenkins describes the explosive growth of the Christian faith in the global South. A central thesis in both books is that, since the centre of Christianity has moved southward, it is no longer correct to speak about Christianity as a Western religion.

The subtitle of *The New Faces of Christianity* is “Believing the Bible in the global South”, which more accurately reflects the author’s primary focus. The Word of God is, front and centre, in those countries experiencing dramatic growth. Jenkins conveys how the Word of God is viewed, used, and sometimes misused, in emerging churches. In the first paragraph of the book, Jenkins whets our appetite for this topic:

On one occasion, two bishops were participating in a Bible study, one, an African Anglican, the other a US Episcopalian. As the

hours went by, tempers frayed, as the African expressed his confidence in the clear words of scripture, while the American stressed the need to interpret the Bible in light of modern scholarship and contemporary mores. Eventually, the African bishop asked, in exasperation, “If you don’t believe the Bible, why did you bring it to us in the first place?”

The author does a masterful job describing how the Word of God has functioned as a powerful source of transformation in many less-developed countries. He details how, in “2004 alone, the United Bible Society distributed 25 million Bibles”. In Africa, the complete scripture is now available in 150 languages. He asserts how “Latin American nations – especially Brazil – are among the world’s largest producers and consumers of Bibles.”

One of the author’s weaknesses is his failure to recognise the Holy Spirit’s role in the efficacy of scripture. The great popularity of scripture, in the South, is due, as much to the Spirit of God, as it is to the Word of God.

Jenkins strikes an unusual balance between fully acknowledging the breath-taking growth of Christianity worldwide, and simultaneously doing justice to the acute poverty and suffering, experienced by the vast majority of global South believers. He relates that life expectancy for most sub-Sahara Africans is in the 40s. AIDS is taking a horrific toll. In six listed countries, Africans can hope to make it only into their 30s, raising the issue of whether these countries can still be labelled as “developing”.

The Word of God is being used in the global South, not only for evangelism and proclamation purposes, but also as a practical tool, to set free those who are bound by demon possession, witchcraft, fear of evil spirits, etc. In many regions, non-Christians and Christians alike come to worship services, searching for, and finding, help in dealing with the intimidating and paralysing fears of the spirit world.

We can take heart that many African believers hold a high view of scripture, which is not always the case in Western countries. In certain traditions, the perspicuity of scripture is being called into question. Enthusiastic African readers, on the other hand, are convinced that the message of God's Word is abundantly clear, with the only remaining question being whether it is to be believed.

In North America, a different dynamic has come into play in the minds of many. Scripture needs to be interpreted in the light of ever-changing moral values. Jenkins astutely observes that for "liberal, Western Christians, these evolving standards constitute a source of authority, quite as powerful as those orthodox values of tradition and scripture, and, sometimes, more demanding". People – such as Jenkins – who are instructors in secular universities, feel tremendous pressure to conform to these evolving standards. One of the great challenges for North American Christianity is whether *Sola Scriptura* will be our guide, in matters of faith and practice, or whether we're going to allow tradition and/or contemporary values to marginalise its message and power.

For those who enjoy tracking the rapid expansion of Christianity, Jenkins' earlier writing is the book of choice. For those interested in understanding the popularity, credibility, and functionality of scripture in the global South, this well-written book is a good read.