



Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*

A book many serious believers need to own

Reviewed by Ralph D. Winter



This is a book “out of the blue,” so to speak.

Philip Jenkins is not well-known in mission circles. As a professor in a secular university (University of Pennsylvania), he would not be expected to be concerned with the global advance of *Christianity*, certainly not in the so-called mission lands.

But he is, and he has done his homework. His 270-page book is published by Oxford University Press, no less. And it is going to create quite a stir—and already has.

Of course, we and many others in the mission movement have long been saying the same thing. But this is coming from the secular world. It is like the *Newsweek* cover story on “Evangelicals” a couple of years ago. It was as though *Newsweek* had discovered the Evangelicals and, through its pages, was now telling the whole country. But of course Evangelicals did not suddenly come into existence, they simply suddenly appeared to *Newsweek*.

So it is with Philip Jenkins’ marvelous book. It accurately portrays a truly major global movement which is both now and in the future an increasingly non-Western phenomenon.

But this global reality is not a movement that came into being just yesterday. Back in 1969, in fact, I wrote a book entitled *The Twenty-Five Unbelievable Years*, in which I described the collapse of the colonial empires in the 25 years following the Second World War and the widespread assumption that the hard-won fruits of the mission movement would collapse as well.

I timidly pointed out that 25 years after the colonial collapse the churches around the world had not disappeared but had grown. Little did I know at that time what was happening in China, where the most

spectacular growth of all time was taking place.

But I knew enough even in 1969 to say that while the colonial political structures had collapsed, the churches overseas had put down roots into the soil of the new lands and were growing to beat the band.

At that time pessimism was so widespread that I had to pussyfoot with my story. In my chapter titles I spoke ambiguously of “The Fate of the Missions, The Fate of the Churches” and only in the text did I gently point out that the overseas church was alive and well.

Looking back, I believe I overstated the case a bit. I realize that both much of what Jenkins describes now and I portrayed then was still highly “Western” Christianity which would probably need to be superseded eventually by more indigenous churches.

Nevertheless, Jenkins is quite aware of both the huge growth of 1) substantially Western varieties of Christianity and 2) the astounding appearance of nerve-rattlingly different non-Western forms. He does not make a great distinction between them.

For example, he is perfectly content to quote the existence of 61,000 priests in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church movement of 25 million people without highlighting the huge, almost total, difference between that age-old tradition (which is largely dead on its feet) and new, fast-growing tribal movements in Ethiopia that can only barely be recognized from a traditional Christian standpoint. He includes Mormons as Christians but admits that some people insist on defining who is a Christian by different criteria.

Curiously, while he presents a strong picture of “Eastern” Christianity until fairly late in Christian history, he does not cite Samuel Moffet’s impressive *Christianity in Asia*.

He speaks respectfully of the huge two-volume *World Christian Encyclopedia*. He may be unaware of the massive “third volume” called *World Christian Trends*, which is the interpretation of the first two volumes. And though he could have made great use of the statistics in *Operation World* by Patrick Johnstone, no mention is made of *OW*. While he knows of William Carey, he makes no mention of Frederick Franson or Hudson Taylor. He does mention an older book about the CIM but not A.J. Broomhall’s magnificent and far more recent six volumes.

The AD 2000 movement is unmentioned in the index, and so also Luis Bush, the World Evangelical Fellowship (now *Alliance*), the Lausanne Committee, Billy Graham, Bill Bright, Campus Crusade, the Jesus Film Project, Wycliffe Bible Translators, even Kenneth Scott Latourette, whose extensive portrayal of global Christianity to 1955 has no parallel.

On the other hand, despite apparently little acquaintance with these key figures, Jenkins does an admirable and crucially important job of revising typical Western European perspectives on the early history of Christianity.

The book, all things considered, is an excellent introduction to the overall phenomenon of Christianity past and present, giving at least half its space to the past despite its forward-looking title. This implies that the title merely highlights his major concern—to give visibility to the gradual, and now momentous, build-up of Christian faith in all the world.

For all serious Christians this is truly an unusual and valuable book. You could well introduce it to thinking friends who may wonder about the future of Christianity. (See our offer on p. 18.)

Boldly and contrary to the dominant perspective of Western academia,

Jenkins brashly states that *the future of Christianity is not in the Western world*. Even its present momentum is not!

Amazing as it may appear to a blasé West, Christianity exercises an overwhelming global appeal, which shows not the slightest sign of waning. (p. 39)

One fascinating insight is his observation that ongoing immigration into this country is actually increasing the percentage of Christians here rather than watering it down.

However ...

But unstated, and yet very important to us here in Pasadena, is the ominous question: even though Christianity is now a remarkable, extensive, and global phenomenon that has “turned into an uncontrollable brush fire” (p. 53), *what will keep it from becoming a burned-out “West” tomorrow?*

The book radiates appreciation for the Pentecostalization of global Christianity, whether Catholic, Protestant or independent. “Some forty new Pentecostal churches are opening in Rio each and every week” (p. 64).

Yet Jenkins does not speculate at what may be next after this marvelous new “Next Christendom.” Will it be like a spiritually dead Europe that followed the emotional flowering of medieval Christendom (and the Crusades)? We have known for a long time that Christianity of the mainly emotional type, however authentic, is “a mile wide and an inch deep.”

Meanwhile, Jonathan Rice, in a cogent “letter” from India (which we will include next time), reports an ominous parallel between Victorian England’s massive Evangelical Awakening and the virtual collapse of that movement in the next century due to its mainly emotional character combined with a pervasive anti-intellectualism.

In Japan, for example, it is already clear that Christianity would have added hundreds of thousands of new members had it been able to keep most of its new members from going out the back door. Two things have fed

this hemorrhage. One has been the inability of Western Christianity to adjust radically to the cultural tradition of Japan. But the other factor is not cultural but universal. Christianity has somewhat coexisted with science, but by now the polarization has seriously heightened. Scientists are focused on creation while Christians are focused on revelation.

Curiously, the Bible embraces both *Creation* and *Revelation*, that is, both *Nature* which considerably displays God’s glory, and the *Bible* which considerably conveys His intent to redeem a fallen creation. These are like two Bibles.

Even in the United States thousands of “secular” scientists are truly awed by the glories of nature (and could be close to the Kingdom) but feel they must ignore the Bible, since thousands of devout Christian scholars who are awed by the glories of His Word feel they must ignore the glories being discovered daily in

science. Neither wants to give up what it “knows” to be truly awesome.

For example, beginning seriously in 1810 Christian believers (and even Oxford professors) began to dig up huge bones in England which did not represent any then-existing creatures. In the next 100 years Christians by and large accepted the antiquity of such fossils. The Scofield Bible made allowance for an “old earth.” The “Fundamental” books in the 1910s and 20s made allowance. But today, especially throughout the homeschool movement, an originally Seventh-Day Adventist theory of a flash creation of a young earth that only looked old has taken root and means many youth are unprepared to confront later on what are widely understood as facts. I am not talking about the bankrupt concept of a Darwinian “unguided” evolution. I am merely talking about the antiquity of the earth.

Today, science has gone so far in so many directions that it is becoming clearer and clearer that most past explanations are simplistic. Scientists are being forced into making statements of sheer faith about the most confus-

ing new discoveries they have ever imagined—such as the whole universe exploding out of a tiny particle, ideas they would have scorned if found in the Bible.

Consider an incredible recent article which we hope to publish in the *International Journal of Frontier Missions*. [I urge you to subscribe to this periodical, which is a weightier “brother” of *Mission Frontiers*, by sending \$15 to IJFM, c/o Rory Clark, 1539 E. Howard Street, Pasadena, CA 91104]. The name of the article is “The New Convergence” by Gregg Easterbrook, a senior editor at *Atlantic Monthly*. He is writing in the December 2002 *Wired* magazine. He spins out an amazing picture of how science is running into unfathomable puzzles which call for faith as much as any religious tradition. And they are making statements which “would be laughed out of town if they came from a religious text.”

In other words, this may be no time to put all our money down on a global and highly emotional “next Christendom,” no matter how sincere and vital it may be—if in fact it is “next” going to dissolve into the ashes of European and American disbelief on the grounds of failure to come to grips with stubborn but highly tangible and intellectual questions.

For example, our theological roots are stuck back in John Calvin’s day, when germs were unknown and prayers were the only resort. Today a stupendous new microbiological world is laid out before us, and Christians are in some respects paralyzed in digesting limitations in their theological inheritance.

Let’s be realistic. In the southeast of this country between 1530 and 1780 one hundred and fifty mission stations grew up and collapsed for one primary reason: the hundreds of thousands of native Americans were totally exterminated, mainly by misunderstood disease. Are we fighting God (or Satan) if we fight disease? Is it a mission? That’s an intellectual question. Does Jenkins’ mushrooming global Christianity answer this question effectively? Singapore ’02 did not address it. Is this a true “frontier” of missions? Look for this in a future issue of *Mission Frontiers*. ☉

