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THE ‘COMING OF GLOBAL CHRISTIANITY’ A CHALLENGE TO NORTHERN MENTAL HEALTH?

JENKINS, P. (2007) *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Revised and Expanded Edition) (Oxford: Oxford UP) XVIII + 316 pp., 23.6x15.7 cm, ISBN 0195168917, \$14.95.

Philip Jenkins, the Distinguished Professor of History and Religious Studies at Pennsylvania State University produced a meticulously researched work which has been labeled by the *National Review* as a ‘wake-up call for northern Christians’. The point I want to present here under the pretext of reviewing his book is that if Jenkins’ prognosis is true – while not necessarily an alarm signal – then it will be definitely a challenge to European or, following the terms of the book, Northern mental health practitioners in so far and especially if they consider religion as potential resources for individuals.

His basic thesis is that ‘far from being an export of the capitalist West, a vestige of Euro-American imperialism, Christianity is now rooted in the Third World, and the religion’s future lies in the global South’ (I.). He even criticises Samuel Huntington for falsely prophesying the populational dominance of Islam in his renowned *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. As Jenkins suggests, the ratio of Christians and Muslims in the mid-twenty first century will be about three to two. Furthermore, while admitting that ‘Muslim countries are indeed experiencing rapid rates of population growth’, Jenkins claims that ‘similar or even higher rates are also found in already populous Christian countries, above all in Africa. Alongside the Muslim efflorescence . . . there will also be a Christian population explosion, often in the same or adjacent countries’ (6).

Apart from presenting demographic trends and statistical data – especially in Chapter 5 – the historian Jenkins, specialising in early Medieval times, masterfully supports his thesis with events and processes from the very beginning of a once new religious movement, called Christianity. In Chapter 2 he provides a concise overview of the history of Christianity with a special attention on how its weight and center shifted from time to time, partly due to the missionary activities. Chapters 3 and 4 continue to focus on missionaries and prophets, but on their counterparts in our own times. The so-called independent churches and their leaders in Africa, Latin-America and Asia are presented here in such a way that reminds the reader of new religious movements and their first generation membership under a charismatic leadership, with all of their successes, controversies, scandals and occasional tragedies.

Mentioning new religious movements, one of the favorite topics of sociologists of religion from the 1960s till the end of the twentieth century, is not accidental. Analysing and interpreting the unfolding process in the global South, Jenkins himself

refers not only to the classical church-sect typology developed by Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch a long time ago but also mentions the usefulness of contemporary literature on new religious movements.

The sociological model of the sect offers a useful means of understanding both independent and Pentecostal churches across the global South. . . . The literature on new religious movements not only provides good models for understanding the distinctive beliefs of such groups, but it may also predict their future development. As time passes, successful sects become more churchlike in their own right, more formal and bureaucratic. . . . Churches beget sects, which in turn become churches, until they in turn beget new and still fierier sects. The cycle has recurred many times, and will continue ad infinitum. . . . If past precedents are anything to go by, Southern religious organizations will become more formal and churchlike, and just possibly more skeptical toward claims about healings and prophetic visions. (158–59)

Being a historian, Jenkins had probably no time and inclination to study thoroughly the sociological literature on new religious movements. He reached one of the possible – although very much debated – conclusions of such a process, namely secularisation in the long run (159), but he ignored the criticism the ‘church-sect-church cycle’ received right from its birth.¹ First of all, apart from churches and sects religious entities can manifest other forms, like denominations and cults. Furthermore, the dynamics and development of these entities are also more complex which cannot be reduced to a two-component cycle. Finally, the lifespan of new religious movements is usually rather short; and only a very small fragment of these movements will be able to achieve at least a century-old history.² All in all, the comparison of the situation of Christianity in the near future with contemporary new religious movements is definitely not the strength of the book.

In spite of these shortcomings, Jenkins’ theory deserves attention. The trends based on the analysis of demographic data cannot be swept away easily, especially when he spices these trends – and their consequences – with historical precedence. Even if we do not accept the shaky sociological foundations, the closing sentence of Chapter 6 must be considered seriously: ‘when the rising churches turn their attentions northward, they might well find a deeply interested audience willing to listen to these very old messages repackaged in such unexpected forms’ (160). These ‘unexpected forms’ are the subject of the remainder of this review.

Contrary to the expectations that the dominantly poor members in Latin America or Asia would be rather liberal, activist, or even revolutionary – as the somewhat wishful thinking of liberation theology suggested – the faithful of Southern churches are rather conservative in terms of both beliefs and moral teaching. This conservatism originates from the two dramatically progressing churches, the traditionalist and fideistic kind of Roman Catholicism and evangelical or Pentecostal Protestantism.

¹ Although Max Weber himself never subscribed explicitly to this simple cycle, his analysis on the routinisation of charisma suggests such a process. GLOCK & STARK (1965) developed such a theory. For its summarised criticism, see MCGUIRE (1997).

² Cf. STARK (1996) 133–46.

Furthermore, even those who ‘espoused political *liberation*, they made it inseparable from *deliverance* from supernatural evil’ (7 – italicisation in the original text). South Christians are inclined to be strongly supernatural who are far more interested in personal salvation than in radical politics.

Jenkins emphasizes from time to time that one of the reasons why Christianity appeals so effectively to the uprooted inhabitants of *favellas* is its ability to provide community. Furthermore, especially the non-traditional religious entities can and do successfully adapt Christian belief to local traditions.

These newer churches preach deep personal faith and communal orthodoxy, mysticism, and puritanism. . . . 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 fundamental parts 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. (8)

What shall a mental health practitioner trained and working in the Northern hemisphere do with a client who expects fast delivery from depression through faith healing or exorcism? A psychologist might be able to analyse some dream-visions, but can she handle prophecies? A social worker might welcome puritan views in his efforts of comforting an unemployed homeless person, but how will he try to organise a community whose members are preoccupied with apocalyptic expectations?

If Jenkins is fifty percent right in his vision of the next – and global – Christianity then mental health practitioners of the North must take these possibilities seriously. Especially, if they have considered religion as a resource which can be utilised either in prevention or in rehabilitation. Whether the basics of mental health are compatible with this version of Christianity remains to be seen, but it would be better to be prepared and probe the possible relationships and potential collisions. After all, according to Jenkins, there is not much time.

References

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