

Discussed: religious revival, modernization, integrated health. Scripture, secular state, Revelation, gay bishops, wealth, prople

# Living Through the Greatest Religious Change in History

*By Philip Jenkins*

**C**HRISTIANITY is changing rapidly worldwide. Through the early stages of its history, Christianity was centered in the eastern Mediterranean; there were as many Christians east of that point as west of that point. Over time, Christianity moved west. And then about 1945 or thereabouts, the center of Christianity left Europe and ever since has been going south and east. If I may use another phrase—going home. It's an African and an Asian religion that is now going home.

We are living through what I argue is the greatest religious change in history. Today, the largest Christian population on the planet is still centered in Europe, but that will change quite rapidly. By around 2025, Africa and Latin America will be vying for the title of the continent with the most Christians. But in the long term there's no doubt that Africa wins. (And that takes account of AIDS, as it has to.)

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By the middle of the century, I argue, Christianity will overwhelmingly be a religion of Africa and the African Diaspora, especially in countries like Brazil. By that point, the proportion of the world's Christians, who will be non-Latino whites like myself, will be somewhere around one-fifth or one-sixth of the global total.

There are two sorts of churches—those that realize this change is happening and those who haven't figured it out yet. In my book, I tried to project the countries in the world that would have the largest Christian



populations. At the head you still have the United States, and then come countries in no particular order: Brazil, Mexico, Nigeria, Congo, Ethiopia, China, and the Philippines.

Let me give you a list of the countries that are not on that list: Britain, France, Spain, Italy. Is anyone living old enough to remember a mythical creature called Western Christianity? If it ever existed, it doesn't any more. The more you look at the development of religion today, the more you realize that its history is radically different from what many of us think it is.

So much of the most amazing growth has happened in Africa. I figure back in 1900 there were approximately 10 million Christians in Africa, representing about 10 percent of the continent's population. By 2000, there were 360 million Christians representing about 46 percent of the continent's population. Numerically alone, that is the largest religious change in human history—no exceptions.

I'm not sure how many people picked it up when they were looking back at the twentieth century. Most of Africa—certainly most of black Africa—has been in the middle of a major religious Christian revival since about the 1890s and it shows no signs of diminishing.

I would argue—other people have argued—that the key fact in understanding religious change over the coming years is the clash of generations. The northern world, the world of Europe and North America, is aging. This is partly because of people postponing child-bearing, not having children, having fewer children. But the result is an older and older northern world standing against a younger and younger southern world.

I can summarize this very easily. The average age of the population of Italy is forty. The average age of the population of Uganda is sixteen. You project that trend a little way into the future and you get an ever-older white northern world, an ever-younger black and yellow and brown southern world. If the northern world wishes to continue and function the only way it can do so is by immigration.

Many people around the world in the last fifty years have converted to Christianity, to different forms of Christianity. I want to suggest some of the reasons why they've converted and discuss their kinds of Christianity. And it's at this point that I'd like to talk particularly about what I call the Adventist dimensions of this change. The Adventists are succeeding very well—with exponential growth. Why? What have they been doing right?

## Wholistic Health

All the factors that thirty years ago were meant to kill religion are the factors that have caused the most growth in Christianity. Thirty, forty years ago, everyone knew that Christianity was going to perish for certain reasons: modernization, urbanization, industrialization. People were going to move into big cities from little villages. They would realize that religion was something they would have to leave behind them. They would become secular, modern, and they would accept all these new ideas.

However, Christianity and Islam have been growing because of modernization, urbanization, and industrialization. People have moved into large cities, which had nothing to offer them—no facilities for welfare, education, or health—except what they provided themselves. Above all, the groups and institutions that have provided these services have been churches or mosques.

I would argue that the Adventist Church is very well placed to take advantage of the currents in global Christianity. First of all, if you look at the Christianity of Africa, of Asia, of Latin America, it has a central concern, which is health of mind and body, with no division at all between the two. The success of a church, the success of a religious tradition, is judged by how far it provides that kind of integrated health.

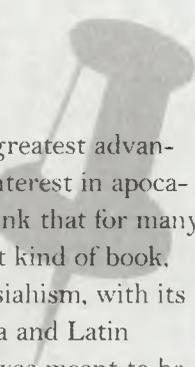
The most successful churches have often been Pentecostal, with a fervent belief in concepts of exorcism and spiritual healing. A church that presents itself in these terms is already well ahead in the argument.

## Interpretation of Scripture

Christian churches often have a problem dealing with the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. We don't talk about the Old Testament; we call it the Hebrew Bible. Instead of the New Testament—this is the Christian Bible. In Africa, in Asia, they look for much more integration of Old and New Testaments. The idea that Old Testament laws and rules and requirements and concepts like the Sabbath are to be taken very seriously is an attractive and powerful message. The Adventist Church presents itself with a kind of consistency that other churches might not offer.

One appealing feature of Adventism is the idea that it lays down very specific rules. The more demanding churches that know exactly what they mean are the groups that are succeeding and have succeeded. One of the best remarks I've heard in recent dialogue was between an American and an African bishop in a Bible study group. The American was trying to present his point of view, and the African got more and more frustrated, until finally he used interesting language: "If you don't believe this Bible, why did you bring it to us in the first place?"

## Emphasis on the Book of Revelation



One other thing that I suggest is the greatest advantage of an Adventist message is that interest in apocalyptic and the book of Revelation. I think that for many Americans Revelation is a very suspect kind of book, associated with the worst kind of messiahism, with its violent implications. In Africa and Asia and Latin America, people read Revelation as it was meant to be read, as a text about the evils of the present order and a statement of divine faithfulness and divine promise.

There is a fundamentally different attitude to secularism and the secular power. For most Americans—and you can criticize many parts of this—secular progress is a reality. Americans have grown up in a world in which civil rights have expanded inconceivably over what they were fifty years ago, where the courts and secular powers have served to liberalize, extend people's rights, basically do good. The church must catch up with the secular world.

Is the secular state a standard to be emulated in Africa, Asia, or Latin America? Ask an Iraqi, ask a Nigerian, ask a Colombian. The secular state represents potentially an evil force—who knows, perhaps a diabolical force. The church represents a refuge, a bastion, against that. In other words, it's very much the kind of vision that you have in Revelation, which says that the world, the secular order, is in the hands of evil forces that are ultimately demonic.

It says that these forces consistently rule through deceit, deception, falsehood, and manipulation, and that their ultimate symbol is money and commercial power. Well, so far if you live in Nigeria or Brazil, this is a political science textbook. Revelation viewed as an analysis and a statement of faith and belief and power

has an enormous value for that kind of audience. In the global South, there is a radically different attitude to evil. People there believe very seriously in evil. They believe in a demonic, satanic force within the churches.

When you think about this, there is one fundamental difference that separates Christians in the United States from those in Nigeria. For Americans, paganism is not a present reality except as what I call an academic curiosity. You have neo-paganism, or Wicca, and so on, basically very benevolent, harmless forces. The main charge you can make against them is that they look silly.

But think about the bishops and leaders of the African or Asian churches, who are first- or second-generation converts from pagan religions, from animism, from traditional religions, who when they read accounts of the works of Baal in the Old Testament see it as a present reality.

When Nigerian archbishop Peter Akinola praised the conservative American bishops who had voted against ordaining a gay bishop, he praised them as the forty-five prophets who refused to bow the knee to Baal. In the West when you accuse somebody of worshipping Baal, at best it's an overwhelming figure of speech. But for somebody who comes from a first- or second-generation Christian community, that carries a remarkably different power.

Pull somebody from a thought group like that and the images in Revelation are immensely powerful. Revelation is one of the most popular books among Latin American liberation theologians because they speak of oppression as diabolical forces. They talk about demonic forces such as corporate exploitation, domestic violence, and pornography. They speak in demonic terms and they refer to Revelation.

It might be that quite apart from the Adventist tradition, more interesting, creative, and innovative work and exegesis has been done on the book of Revelation in the last fifty years in Africa and Asia and Latin America than has been done in North America in the last four hundred. This is a very exciting time for that kind of study.

I'm not saying there is one thing called southern Christianity. Of course, there isn't, there are southern Christianities. Something that is going to happen in all denominations is that as European and American churches divide by issues of gender, sexuality, sexual preference (and they are going to be divided by all those if they haven't so far), there is going to be north/south conflict.

Increasingly, northern conservatives will align with the southern. You've seen that very much with the Anglican tradition, within the Episcopal Church. There's a group, for instance, called the Anglican Mission in America, which is a group of American conservative Episcopalians who basically declared independence from their own bishops and authorities and placed themselves under the authority of bishops in Uganda and Singapore and Nigeria.

Interesting name, the Anglican Mission in America—people who bring orthodoxy to missionary territory. I think that's going to be very widespread.

I think the best single remark I came across while I was working on this book was from Saint Vincent de Paul, a great seventeenth-century French writer and activist. He was writing in 1640 (arguably the worst year in European history before 1940), when Protestants were killing Catholics, Catholics were killing Protestants, Christians were killing Jews; everyone was killing people whom they believed to be witches. It was an awful time. He said something very wise: Jesus said his church would last until the end of time, but he never mentioned the word *Europe*.

The church of the future, Saint Vincent said in 1640, would be the church of Africa, South America, China, and Japan. We can argue with the word *Japan*, though Japan in the twentieth century did produce the greatest Catholic novelist and, arguably, Christian novelist of modern times, Shusaku Endo. I would say that at the moment Europe is very much fulfilling Saint Vincent's comment. Europe is secularizing and de-Christianizing at a remarkable rate.

However, Christianity is showing signs of being reintroduced as an immigrant religion. The largest Christian congregation in Europe today is in Kiev, in the Ukraine. The church in Kiev was founded by a man who was brought over from Nigeria by the former Soviet Union in the 1980s as a student. He arrived, and the Soviet Union collapsed around him. He set up a new church.

Apparently, it has thirty thousand members, but it's growing very fast and nobody's really counting. Fortunately, in places like Kiev you have these vast union halls and party assemblies built by the former communists. By the way, the appeal of that church is fundamentally based on health—health and cure. And if you look at its Web site, it says that it offers cures for diseases, including cancer and AIDS.

In London, you have an equivalent character who runs one of these great Nigerian transnational ministries. He has a huge video and audiotape ministry and

speaks on cable across West Africa and Europe. He arrived in London in 1992. By 2000, he had built the largest new church built in Britain since 1851, which seats more than Westminster Abbey. It's an extremely successful church, also growing very fast.

A couple years ago, he started something called a Britain Barriers Crusade because he wanted to spread the gospel to white people. What he actually said was this: You can't expect people to feel comfortable among folks who look different from them with a very different culture. So what he tried to do was to present the gospel in terms that white British people could understand and feel comfortable with. But "unfortunately," he says, "they won't see us as a God-thing; they see us as a black-thing." This might be the story of Christianity in Europe.

The story in America, I think, will be very different in a sense that the underlying Christianity is very strong. When European visitors come to see me in America, they look at those ultimate symbols of aspiration and faith in the future, the church parking lots, and they're amazed at their size. Back home, the churches that go out of use (as they do so very regularly) become apartments, coffee-houses, and mosques. When churches fall out of use in the United States, what do they become? New churches! Korean churches, Chinese churches, Nigerian churches. Unlike in Europe, America is not replacing the older Christianity; it's adding new levels.

When I look at the Adventist experience as I understand it, I'm not for a second surprised that you have the kind of growth and change that you have.

I'm going to end with a question. We'll be looking at a world where, say, 10 percent of your church might be non-Latino white. What portion of the wealth and the resources of the Church does that 10 percent hold—90 percent, 95 percent? That's absolutely typical.

That may be the most important issue for Christian churches in the next one hundred years—the near total contrast between where the wealth is and where the people are. Sometimes in my more pessimistic moments, I put these factors together and I wonder if maybe Christians in the global south churches will look at the book of Revelation and start thinking that Babylon is not just the global north, but also the churches of the global north.

On that cheery note, I will draw to an end.

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