

# Another Copernican Revolution!

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## 1. An eye-opener

This is a review article of the book, *The Next Christendom* (Oxford University Press, 2007) by Philip Jenkins, Distinguished Professor of History and Religious Studies at Pennsylvania State University; pp 316; \$ 14.95. The volume is a revised and expanded edition of his earlier book published in 2002. Maps of the various continents and a dozen lists of tables help to suitably illustrate the content of the book. Every assertion of the author is copiously documented. He uses the term “Christendom”, not in a political sense, but in a neutral, supranational sense. The book takes up a well known theme, first popularized by Walbert Buhlmann in his book *The Coming of the Third Church* (St. Paul Publications, 1976), which I reviewed in *Vidyajyoti*, 1990, pp 295-299. In that book Buhlmann startled the Christian world when he pieced together, as in a jigsaw puzzle, a mass of scattered data on the Christian churches. The resultant picture was astonishing: a “Third Church” was at hand ! The “First Church”, in time, is the Eastern (Oriental) Church; the Second is the Western Church. The Third Church is part of the new nations, now entering as a new factor into the history of the Church. The Third Church contains what Buhlmann calls the “surprise packets” of the near future. A decade later, Omer Degrijse surveyed further data in his book, *Going Forth, Missionary consciousness in Third World Catholic churches* (Orbis, 1984). This only served to confirm the continued development of the trends described by Buhlmann.

In Jenkins’ book, the terms “Southern churches” or “South” are used to comprise the tri-continental countries of Latin America, Africa south of the Sahara, Oceania and Asia. The churches here largely cover

Buhlmann's 'Third Church'. Europe and North America are comprised under the rubric of "Northern hemisphere" or "North". There follows a presentation of the salient features of the data gathered by Jenkins, followed by some comments of my own.

## 2. *The Shift South*

If in 1900 two-thirds of the world's Christians were found in Europe, today that figure has dropped to less than a quarter and is expected to shrink still further by 2025. That data should be evaluated in the light of the fact that in Europe "rates of church membership and religious participation have been declining precipitously in a long-term trend that shows no signs of slowing" (p 109). Recent critics are wondering whether Christianity's days are numbered there. Pope Benedict XVI seems to be chiefly engaged in making a last-ditch defence of organized Christianity in Western Europe. But clearly, "The era of Western Christianity has passed ... and the day of Southern Christianity is dawning ... There can be no doubt that the emerging Christian world will be anchored in the Southern continents" (pp 3, 17). *Christianity has "gone South" !* In as much as the centre of gravity of the Church has shifted to the South, we are witnessing a sort of Copernican revolution. This is by no means the first time that such a change has occurred. The centre of Christianity first shifted from Jerusalem to Antioch; from thence to the rest of West Asia (which hosted and dominated the great Ecumenical Councils) and to Italy. Of the five ancient patriarchates, all but one (Rome) lay in the East. At a later stage it "passed over to the barbarians" (Western, Central and Northern Europe). The latter, in their turn, exercised a strong influence on the form, thinking and practices of Western Christianity. Hence, "As Christianity moves southward, the religion will be comparably changed by immersion in the prevailing cultures of those host societies" (7). The once flourishing Christian communities in West Asia were devastated in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by a combination of wars, expulsions and population exchanges; unfortunately the process continues today.

It is high time we started referring to southern Christianity as "mainstream" Christianity. The southern churches share similar issues of poverty, race and inculturation; also religious pluralism much more than in the north. Among these churches a vast exchange of missionaries has been on in a vigorous manner and still awaits a major book-length

treatment. Indian missionaries are present in about 160 countries around the world. One can already see how these churches increasingly define their own interests in ways that have little to do with the preferences of the North. Hilaire Belloc's (1870-1953) assertion, that "Europe is the faith; the (Catholic) Church is Europe", is by far outdated.

### 3. *Historical Background*

Chapter Two provides an excellent overview of the historical development of Christianity from its earliest times into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A flourishing Syrian Christianity existed in India, at least from the 4<sup>th</sup> century. By the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Nestorian missionaries from Syria and Persia had already penetrated deep into Central Asia and China and established churches there; in the 14<sup>th</sup> century they probably numbered hundreds of thousands. Jenkins surmises: "In the thirteenth century, the height of medieval Christian civilization in Europe, there may have been more Christian believers on the continent of Asia than in Europe" (28). The Spanish conquerors may have brought Christianity to Latin America, but when they "tried to destroy every written remnant of the ancient Meso-American civilization, all its literature and science no less than its religious materials, they were perpetrating one of the gravest crimes in the history of civilization" (35). The admission of pope John Paul II was rather late in coming, but still welcome. On 12 March 2000 he led officials of the Roman Curia in confessing some of the public sins of the Church of the past and present. Among them he asked pardon for Christians who "have often denied the Gospel; yielding to a mentality of power, they have violated the rights of ethnic groups and peoples, and shown contempt for their cultures and religious traditions" (*The Pope Speaks*, 2004, N. 4, p 247).

That Christianity grew as a grassroots movement in the South may be seen in the fact that it has not only outlasted the political and commercial order which brought it, but has continued to grow by leaps and bounds (see below). How deeply the faith had taken root is brought out by the fact, that "considered globally, the second half of the nineteenth century must be seen as one of the great ages of Christian martyrdom" (53). The missionary message did offer individuals a means of explaining the world around them, when the old world-view began to crumble in face of immense social change. Particularly remarkable is the growth of African Independent/Indigenous Churches, "which

collectively represent one of the most impressive stories in the whole history of Christianity” (61). These churches may differ among themselves in certain ideas and practices, but one thing they have in common is the adaptation of Christianity to local cultures and traditions: something the mainline churches have dismally failed in. Independents world-wide number about 427 million and their number continues to grow rapidly. These churches definitely cater to a vast public hunger. What exercises a strong appeal to people are miracles, release from demonic powers and sometimes even financial prosperity, so that some of these churches have been called ‘health and wealth’ churches (79). Then during the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, black-white tensions made many members of the mainline churches feel more comfortable in the Independent churches.

#### 4. *The Data*

Chapter Four contains a wealth of data in the form of statistics and figures, illustrating the stunning growth of churches in the South. Just since 1965, the Christian population of Africa has risen from around a quarter of the continental total to about 46 % ! (64). The 20<sup>th</sup> century has seen a 6,708 % growth of the Catholic population in Africa: “the most rapid expansion of Catholicism in a single continent in two thousand years of church history” (67). The annual baptismal totals for Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of the Congo are each higher than those for Italy, France, Spain, and Poland, which are today the major centres of Catholic population in Europe (227); to be noted is that 37 % of all baptisms in Africa today are of adults. Today, one in eight Catholics is an African. Nigeria is home to the world’s largest Catholic theological school, with a thousand students on three campuses. The number of Catholics in Latin America alone is nearly double that of those in Europe. Two-thirds of all Catholics now reside in the South. Also, especially in Latin America and the Philippines, Pentecostal churches have been growing steadily. Urban migration has liberated ordinary people from traditional religious structures. The new Christian congregations they meet here replace the old family networks and provide a sense of fellowship. The strongly clericalized Catholic Church faces a desperate shortage of priests, due to which Catholics have been joining other churches in droves, because they offer a far greater sense of popular commitment and lay participation. In Mexico,

if the ratio of pastors to faithful is 1:6400 for Catholics, it is 1:250 among Protestants. Hence if the future of the Church lies in the South, it may not be advisable to 'import' priests into the North. The Catholic charismatic groups have to some extent helped to stem the tide of Catholics joining Pentecostal churches. Although blacks make up about half the national population of Brazil, they supply only 1.5 % of bishops and priests. As a result, many Afro-Brazilians join the new churches where they can rise to leadership positions, and which are more accommodating to their own cultural traditions. According to Jenkins it is beyond doubt, that Brazil will soon be a key centre of world Christianity.

In mainland China there are probably more Christians than in either France or Great Britain. One quarter of the national population of Korea is now Christian. India has more Christians than most European nations. The Philippines is soon heading to be home to the third or fourth largest number of Christians on the planet; it already counts more Christians than any individual European State. There are only half as many Catholics in the whole of the Netherlands as in just the Manila metropolitan area. An ever increasing number of Religious Congregations have Indian/Asian Superiors General or General Counsellors.

### *5. Some Characteristics of Southern Christianity*

Southern Christianity will continue to be enthusiastic (dancing or swaying in solemn religious settings), spontaneous (various forms of popular piety), fundamentalist (literal interpretations of the Bible) and supernatural oriented (visions, dreams, ecstatic utterances, healings, the influence of spiritual forces in everyday life, exorcism), thus marking it out from the older centres of Christianity in the North. Southern Christians feel more at home than those in the North with biblical notions of the supernatural, of persecution and martyrdom. The Marian sanctuary of Guadalupe is Christianity's most visited sanctuary. Marian devotion has been a powerful force in African Catholicism from its beginnings. Several issues which agitate the North are either non-issues in the South or are strongly opposed, e.g. ordination of women and of homosexual priests and bishops. Thus at the 1998 Lambeth conference of the global Anglican Communion, the Southern bishops formed a solid bloc to defeat liberal motions on gay rights. Similar issues have also surfaced among Lutherans, Methodists,

and Presbyterians. The 'death of God' theology which raged in the North in the 1960's was quite irrelevant in the South. Nigeria alone accounts for about two-thirds of all Anglicans. We can no longer hold that what is traditionally done in the North is the rule by which to assess local adaptations. Many in Africa and east Asia may find more power and relevance in the image of Jesus as great Ancestor. The South is also strikingly youthful, in contrast to the North. 50% of Asians are under 20 years of age (about 40% Indians are under 15). With a median age of 16, the world's youngest nations are found in Africa: Uganda, Niger and the Congo. With a median age of 40, the world's oldest countries are all in Europe (Italy, Germany, Sweden) or Japan. Together with this we are also witnessing the increasing economic, political and military clout of China and India.

Furthermore we need to take account of the phenomenon of "new Europeans". The numbers involved in peaceful immigration far exceed those of the world's largest armed forces (224). These immigrants include a large percentage of Christians. To what extent they may contribute to a revitalization of Christianity in the West is a moot question. About half of London's people are now non-white; that trend is likely to continue for the whole of Great Britain. Muslims make up more than 8 % of the population of France and about 15 % of the population of Russia. The picture is somewhat different for the U.S.A. where the estimates for the numbers of Jews, Buddhists, Muslims and Hindus is only about 4-5 % of the total population. Yet 28 % of those ordained in the U.S. in 2001 were born outside the country. The same phenomenon is noticeable among the Protestant denominations too.

The churches of the South are also largely churches of the poor. For the overwhelming majority of their members the Beatitudes of the New Testament have a direct relevance, hardly understood by most Christians in Northern societies. The former are really the poor, the hungry, the persecuted and oppressed. In India, at least half of them belong to tribal and "Dalit" ('crushed', 'oppressed') communities. "Dalit" in fact comes close to the sense of the term Jesus uses for the poor ('ptochoi') in Lk 6.20. For the churches of the South poverty has also meant financial dependence on the churches of the North. This has sometimes brought with it a measure of control by the North. Hence

the churches of the South need to move towards greater financial independence.

Chapter Seven gives examples, too numerous to quote all, of the enormous influence which the religions –including the churches– exercise in political and public life in the South. The secular, ‘rational’ North has been slow to understand this, resulting in some policy disasters on their part. Kim Dae Jung, elected President of the Republic of Korea in 1997, described his own Catholic Church as ‘the centrifocal point of the spiritual struggle against the Park dictatorship’ (174). The influence which the Philippino church wields in the political life of that country is well known, particularly with the ouster of President Marcos. Protestantism has emerged as a distinctive force in mass politics across Latin America. Thus Peru elected Alberto Fujimori its first Pentecostal President in 1990; some months later Guatemala had its first Protestant President.

## 6. *Religious Tensions*

Tensions have also arisen in the global South between religions and among churches. Hence the great need of inter-religious and ecumenical dialogue. Jenkins exemplifies the parochialism of Western public opinion by the fact that when a single racial or religious-motivated murder takes place in the North, it receives widespread coverage. But when thousands are massacred on grounds of their faith in Africa and Asia, the story rarely registers (189). Often conflicts arise when one religious tradition tries to impose its own legal and social values on the others. Examples may be cited from Egypt, Sudan, Nigeria, Turkey, Indonesia. Not rarely, ethnic and political issues are mixed up. “Of the world’s twenty-five largest nations by 2050, twenty will be predominantly or entirely Christian or Muslim” (192). Christian-Muslim conflicts have become commonplace in many countries. In time, there could be inter-religious violence in Europe itself. Mutual recriminations between Northern Christians on the one hand and Muslim, Sikh, Hindu immigrants on the other, about religious practices and sensitivities are an ominous sign of things to come. Muslims have perceived this scenario. In 2007 over a hundred Muslim scholars from various countries issued a call to Christian leaders to begin a dialogue from the foundational principles of both faiths: love of the One God and love of the neighbour. Given the intermingling of such vast

multitudes of Christians and Muslims, the scholars state in the opening paragraph: “Without peace and justice between these two religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world. The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians.”

Religious violence is by no means limited to Muslim-Christian conflicts. The expansion of these two religions tends to be viewed with hostility by Hindus in India and Buddhists in some other Asian countries (Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Vietnam, Thailand). Jenkins’ prognosis is very reasonable: “As populations grow in the regions of most intense religious conflict, issues of faith will increasingly shape secular politics, domestic and international ... Issues of theocracy and religious law, toleration and minority rights, conversion and apostasy, should be among the most divisive in domestic and international politics for decades to come” (217, 222).

## 7. *A Lacuna*

One lacuna in Jenkins’ book is, that after presenting extensive data regarding numbers and statistics, he has not developed his own lapidary statement concerning “the lively scholarly activity and the flourishing spirituality in the global South” (14). This may be filled in with data provided by Degrijse in his book referred to at the start of this review article (See also: J.C. England). In connection with India alone he observes: “No other Asian church has so many scholars, theologians, faculties of theology, pastoral institutes, theological and pastoral reviews. The Indian church can make use of the cultural and religious wealth of the peoples of India as an instrument for further reflection on the good news and for better understanding of its own mission”. He further notes: “India has a growing number of renowned theologians, whose contributions to theological and missiological reflection are appreciated even outside India.” The number of theological, philosophical and inter-religious reviews has been growing steadily during the last few years. These are found to be highly relevant in the questions they deal with and the manner in which they are tackled. In contrast, most of the Western journals speak to us less and less. It is no wonder that new journals are constantly being started in the South, while some of the Western ones have had to close down, due to a lack of sufficient response. Degrijse concludes that the Indian church is “a lively church ... In the years to come, it will be called upon to be



one of the pillars of the universal church ... India has become the most important missionary country of the third church. And this is but a beginning.” The picture emerging from many other Southern churches is equally encouraging. This may be related to the fact, that while Asia provides a much smaller percentage of Christians as compared to Africa or Latin America, it is home to highly developed and millennial philosophies, religions and literary traditions. This was acknowledged by John Paul II in his Encyclical “Fides et Ratio” (1998): “Among these lands, India has a special place ... In India particularly, it is the duty of Christians now to draw from this rich heritage the elements compatible with their faith, in order to enrich Christian thought” (N. 72).

Another area which does not find mention in Jenkins’ book is that of ever growing non-Western Christian art: painting, music, dance, architecture. Earlier, works on Christian art published in Europe totally ignored non-western Christian art, although examples of it can be found already in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This was a case of the “eurocentrism” referred to below (sec. 8.1). A number of Asian countries have their own associations of Christian artists. Walls (186) can confidently conclude: “But that a new phase of Christian art has opened, with its focus in the southern continents, is beyond doubt.”

### *8. Adjusting to Another Copernican Revolution*

A new form of Christianity is in the making in the now dominant South and is straining to express itself. A sea change has taken place in the configuration of Christianity. Adjusting to the revolution described in this essay will require on the part of some a veritable ‘metanoia’, an about-turn, a conversion, a new way of looking at world Christianity. And here lies the rub. Many in the North have not realized this, or if they have, they are not willing to accept its implications. In this context Fox (134-135) describes the growing gulf between the Vatican and Asia. If I may speak of the Catholic Church, what is called for is both a change of mentality and an accompanying change of structure at the centre: “No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak ... new wine is put into fresh wine-skins” (Mt 9.16-17) ! We must read the signs of the times (Mt 16.3), the writing on the wall (Dan 5.5-6).

## 8.1 *A Change of Outlook*

There is required an openness to accept new theologies, the legitimate variety of expressions of the profession of faith, new forms of spirituality, new ways of liturgical celebrations: all of which may then require new Codes of Canon Law. In reference to what is happening in the Asian churches, Fox describes it as “a new way of being Church”. All this will ultimately mean the rise of new Rites within the unity of the same Church. Sadly the Roman centre is presently closed to or at least exceedingly suspicious of any developments or proposals in this context (Saldanha: 1997; 2006). A fear has been spread among editors of prestigious theological journals, at least in India, regarding what they publish; they have to look constantly over their shoulder. This atmosphere needs to be replaced by one of serene and sincere dialogue, for all can err and all can learn.

It is amazing to see how far Rome is willing to bend over backwards to accommodate small Lefebvre groups or others attached to the Tridentine Mass, while blocking any liturgical inculturation beyond a few externals, for the vast churches of the South. Through his *Motu Proprio* “*Summorum Pontificum*” (7/7/2007) Benedict XVI reinstated the Tridentine Mass and Breviary; also the sacraments as promulgated before Vatican II in 1962. One the reasons he adduced to justify his decision: “Looking back over the past, to the divisions which in the course of the centuries have rent the Body of Christ, one continually has the impression that, at critical moments when divisions were coming about, not enough was done by the Church’s leaders to maintain or regain reconciliation and unity ... omissions on the part of the Church have had their share of blame for the fact that these divisions were able to harden.” Perhaps it is not realized that the same factors are at work in the growing gulf between the Vatican and the Asian churches. Also, hundreds of thousands of Catholics in Latin America have been opting for other churches and Christian communities.

We know that John Paul II asked pardon for many sins of the past (above, N. 3). But this remains ineffective, so long as there is no effort to change the mind-set and the structures which gave rise to those sins or made them possible. One does not see much effort in this line, thus leaving the way open to a repetition of the same sins ! Do we not see a repetition of the condemnation of the Chinese and Malabar rites in

the proscription in 1975 of the Indian Eucharistic Prayer and the Order of the Mass for India ? (Saldanha, 1997: 70-73). The still unhealed schism of 1054 between the Latin Church and the Orthodox Church was driven primarily by cultural factors, though theological and political issues got mixed up in this as usual. Thus the 'filioque' controversy was fuelled by different approaches to the Trinity, stemming from different cultures; added to this were such trivial issues as the use of unleavened bread in the Eucharist and priests being clean shaven (Jenkins: 244).

Eurocentrism was the chief bane of missionary work during the colonial period (Saldanha: 1988). It dies hard. This may be illustrated from the history of the Vatican II "Declaration on the relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions". It began as a Declaration on the Jews, because this was a burning issue for Europe. Thanks to interventions from bishops, especially from the younger churches, it was broadened to include other religions. Today too care should be taken to avoid a rather one-sided concern for Europe: its secularization and the 'emptying of the churches' there.

## 8.2 *A Change of Structures*

The cardinalate is not of divine institution and could therefore be abolished; it came into existence rather late in Church history. Apart from being a "dignity" (contrary to the Gospel), its chief purpose seems to be to elect a new pope. However, following the Consistory of 24/11/2007, there is no proportion of cardinals to the data submitted in this essay: more than half the cardinals are from Europe and 21 of 121 electors are from Italy (*The Tablet*, 20/10/2007, p 34). The Philippine Senate even passed a resolution protesting that no new Cardinal had been named for their country ! The question is sometimes raised: since the pope appoints the cardinals, could he not thereby pre-determine, to some extent, that the conclave elect as his successor someone in his own image and likeness ? Can the cardinals be considered as really representative of the thinking of the Episcopal Conferences from which they come ? There is much substance in this objection.

A solution should begin from the basic premise that the supreme governing body in the Church is neither the College of Cardinals nor the Roman Curia, but the universal episcopate (inclusive of its head

which it elects). For practical purposes, the college of bishops could accept that its head be elected by a Synod of bishops elected from each national or continental Episcopal Conference. The number of bishops so elected should be roughly in proportion to the number of Catholics in their countries/continents. This would ensure that “*fullness in unity*” and “*united variety*” (LG 13, 23; emphasis added) which constitutes the catholicity of the Church. We might then expect that the choice of the head would be more expressive of the universal body of bishops. Unity must not be confused with uniformity.

Likewise the heads of the various Roman Congregations and Pontifical Councils could be headed by persons chosen by the Episcopal Conferences: if necessary, a ‘terna’ of three names could be suggested to the head (pope) of the college of bishops for his selection. This will help to make the documents issued by the various Dicasteries of the Vatican representative of the faith and thinking of the supreme governing body of the Church. The current method of internationalising the Curia has not ensured this, since the persons concerned are not proposed by the Bishops’ Conferences. Furthermore, the Dicasteries should generally consult with the Episcopal Conferences before issuing documents which they expect to be binding on the whole Church. Otherwise we will continue to see some of these documents being met with sullen silence or even open disagreement. Not rarely, bishops, and even cardinals, have expressed public criticism of such documents. It is not surprising that the ‘schemata’ prepared by the Roman Curia for the bishops at Vatican II, were rejected and entirely new ones drafted by the bishops. Finally, there should be interaction, sharing and dialogue, not only directly with Rome but also between the various Continental bishops’ Conferences.

These measures will probably contribute in no small measure to the enrichment and “united variety” (“*in unum conspirans varietas*”: LG 13; 23) of all the churches.

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