

The Lost History of Christianity – A Review

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Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia – and How It Died*, New York, NY: HarperOne. 2008.

In his work *The Lost History of Christianity*, Philip Jenkins paints a vibrant picture of the Christian Church in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, particularly the Nestorian and Jacobite traditions, and the prosperity they enjoyed up to the middle ages. However, this prosperity does not endure once the middle ages do come and these Churches begin to disappear. Jenkins is careful to mention this disappearance was not an instantaneous process and was in fact a process that carried itself out all the way through the early 20th century. Jenkins also quickly dismisses the notion that these disappearances were caused exclusively by persecution at the hands of new Muslim empires, rather, while persecution was a factor, Jenkins proposes these churches were victims of a shifting socio-political climate.

Jenkins structures his book in a very logical, linear order. Beginning with the vibrant experiences of the eastern churches, their size in term of numbers and geographical reach, and touching on their theology, he then moves into describing the drawn out process by which these churches began to disappear from the physical map and conscious thought, wrapping up with warnings for the contemporary Christian Church and lessons they may take from the eastern experience. Jenkins source material leaves one wanting a little as he lacks a significant number of documents and manuscripts that would have housed within lost churches and monasteries, an unfortunate consequence of the uprooting these traditions experienced. Nevertheless Jenkins still draws from a vast array of primary sources including, but not limited to, the writings of John of Damascus and reports of travelling bishops to illustrate the experiences of these eastern churches

and the environments they were contained in. Jenkins does not make extensive use of secondary sources, but where necessary he uses arguments formulated by his contemporaries to supplement his own arguments and arrive at his own conclusions.

In terms of his argument that these churches were the victim of socio-political circumstance Jenkins offers many compelling evidences. Chief among these is the information he presents that Christian persecution was not usually brought about because of religious intolerance but for a variety of other factors. These factors included fears the Christians would serve as a “fifth column” of support for rival empires and would bring down the Islamic empire from within as well as resentment from poorer Muslims towards educated Christian elites who often held high political offices. These factors manifested into violent persecutions at times but were more often seen in the form of special taxes and tributary practices to remind Christians they were second to the Muslim culture they were now a part of. It would be easy to write off such persecutions as meaningless as any immediate impact was usually minimal however Jenkins avoids this situation by reminding the reader that these societal pressures endured for hundreds of years, a long enough time to break down even the most resolute person. Jenkins also makes mention of higher Muslim birthrates and large scale immigration patterns which reduced the proportion of Christians in the eastern areas. Jenkins even makes a connection between the Syriac churches, their decision to adapt the Arabic language, and the impact this would have had on the churches as they were now readily conforming to the culture around them at the expense of centuries of tradition.

These evidences, among many others, are effectively gathered by Jenkins to make a very compelling case for his hypothesis. Not all of his evidences are extremely intuitive, such as the adaption of Arabic or climate change being a harbinger of social tensions, however the beauty of

these arguments is how unintuitive they are. By presenting these seemingly unconventional evidences Jenkins is able to draw the reader's attention towards his premises more effectively and allowing them to think beyond stereotypical images of violent intolerance being the sole cause of these churches demise. Jenkins also enhances his hypothesis by placing the churches in their correct historical context, from illustrating their initial receptiveness to Muslim rulers and the number of Christians in political office to his descriptions of now largely forgotten centres of Christian strength such as Edessa. By providing these contexts, Jenkins is able to describe in much greater detail how significant this disappearance of Christianity truly was and in turn illustrate the number of complexities that factored into these events. This book serves as valuable historical reading because of the wide range of socio-political problems it addresses as well as the aforementioned context it provides the reader with, much of which, as Jenkins points out, has been lost to time and collective thought.

In the context of this course, this book provides thought provoking insight into some of the themes developed in lectures and discussions. One of these themes is the overall direction the Church took, from a small Jewish sect to being primarily based in Europe. Jenkins is thoroughly convincing while explaining the future of the Christian Church didn't necessarily lie with Rome and the west and the eastern Nestorian or Jacobite churches could just as easily have turned into the dominate forces that shaped Christian thought. This book also highlights the complexities of the relationship between the Church and political entities. One recurring theme in this course has been how the Church has interacted with the state, from experiencing persecution to becoming the official imperial religion, and Jenkins explains in great detail how the churches of the east were very much the victims of political circumstance. Jenkins also provides a much better understanding of early Christian-Muslim relations, moving beyond extreme stereotypes of either

relentless persecution or idealistic toleration, showing how both religions influenced each other and people of the two faiths interacted with each other, in particular, in the political sphere.