

Check Against Delivery.
Embargoed until 9:15 AM, 6 November 2010

The Bible in a Changing Christian World

by Philip Jenkins
Pennsylvania State University, University Park, USA

Session 12, Keynote Lecture
 Our Common Future, Essen, November 6th, 2010

Summary

Though prophecy rarely lends itself to being tested and proven, one exception might be an observation of St. Vincent de Paul, writing about the year 1640. This was one of the grimmest periods of European history, the most desperate days of the Thirty Years War, and moreover, the climax of the European witch-hunts. In those awful days, Vincent noted that Jesus promised that his Church would last until the end of time; but he never mentioned Europe. The Church of the future, Vincent said, would be the Church of South America, of Africa, of China and Japan. Although we might argue about the inclusion of Japan in that list, St. Vincent's basic point remains sound and, dare I say, prophetic. Our traditional concept of Christian world as a predominantly white and Euro-American world – of Western Christianity in fact - is no longer the norm. That fact has vast implications for notions of church, and for mission.

SHIFTING NUMBERS

I wish to tell a very simple story, but one that has complex consequences. Briefly, I will describe what has happened to the number and distribution of Christian believers worldwide over the past century or so, and how it has changed. I will then explore some of the implications of this change.

I have remarked that the story is simple, and indeed it is. In the year 1900, about one-third of the world's people were Christians, and that proportion remains more or less unchanged today. Moreover, if we project our estimate forward to the year 2050, that proportion should still be about one third. The Christian proportion of the world's population therefore seems strikingly stable.

In other ways, though, the changes are far more striking. For one thing, the vast increase of global population means that the number of Christians has grown steeply in absolute terms. Global population in 1900 stood at 1.62 billion, compared to 6.9 billion today, and probably rising to 9.2 billion by 2050. As a result, the number of Christians alive today is about four times greater what it was in 1900. Just by retaining a constant share of the world's population, then – that constant third - Christian numbers have swollen at a rate unimaginable to most eras of Christian history.

Far more significant, though, is the geographical distribution of these believers, which is sketched in Table 1, and which draws from the extraordinarily valuable resources supplied by the World Christian Database (WCD). As I will explain, I have difficulty in accepting the exact validity of these numbers, especially in certain regions. But as a broad guide to the overall picture, the Database is reliable.

The most important trend we notice from these figures is, of course, the precipitous *relative* decline of North America and Europe as Christian heartlands. This does not mean that Christian numbers in these regions have declined, quite the contrary. Rather, these religious blocs have been overwhelmed by the relative growth of Christian numbers elsewhere, above all in those

regions that have since the 1980s been known as the Global South – that is, the continents of Africa, Asia and Latin America. According to the evidence presented by the WCD, between 1900 and 2010, the number of Christians in Europe grew by 29 percent, a substantial figure. In Africa, though, the absolute number of recorded believers grew in the same period by an incredible 4,930 percent. The comparable growth in Latin America was 877 percent. The growth for particular denominations was even more startling. During the twentieth century, Africa's Catholic population grew from 1.9 million to 130 million—an increase of 6,708 percent.

Two different processes are at work here. One is the growth of Christianity in some regions of the world at the expense of other faiths, above all of traditional or primal religions. This was most marked in Africa, where the Christian proportion of the continental population grew during the twentieth century from about ten percent of the whole to around 46 percent.

No less significant though was the spectacular increase of populations in the Global South. While European fertility rates remained stable or declined, the rates remained very high elsewhere in the world. In Latin America, the steep growth in Christian numbers is entirely due to population change. A continent that was already in 1900 almost wholly Christian (at least in terms of notional allegiance) simply acquired far more people.

The demographic change is even more marked in Africa, which in 1900 had perhaps 100 million people. That number passed the billion mark by 2005, and by 2050 the number could reach anywhere from 2 to 2.25 billion. Just to take one example, in the lands that would become Kenya, the population in 1900 was a mere one million, but that figure has now swollen to around 40 million, in little over a century. By 2050, Kenya could have 80 million people or more.

Not only were there far more Africans, but a much larger share of them were Christian. In consequence, the absolute number of African believers soared, from just 10 million in 1900 to 500 million by 2015 or so, and (if projections are correct) to an astonishing billion by 2050. Put another way, the number of African Christians in 2050 will be almost twice as large as the total figure for all Christians alive anywhere in the globe back in 1900.

Twentieth century Christianity was decidedly a Euro-American faith. Combining Christian numbers in Europe and North America, these continents accounted for 82 percent of all believers in 1900, and even by 1970, that figure had fallen only to 57 percent. Since that point however, change has been very marked. Today, Euro-American Christians make up 38 percent of the worldwide total, and that figure could reach a mere 27 percent by 2050.

Actually, even those figures gravely understate the scale of the change, because the Christians listed as “European” or “North American” today include large communities from the Global South. By 2050, for instance, perhaps a quarter of the people of the USA will have roots in Latin America, and fifty or sixty million Americans will claim a Mexican heritage. Another eight percent of Americans will have Asian ancestry, and usually those communities – Korean, Chinese, Vietnamese – have strong Christian elements. In Europe also, those enduring Christian populations will include sizable immigrant communities – African, Asian and Afro-Caribbean. In 2050, therefore, even our “Euro-American” Christians will include Congolese believers living in Paris, or Koreans in Los Angeles.

If we envisage the Christianity of the mid-21st century, then at least in numerical terms, we have to think of a faith located much nearer the Equator. Again according to WCD statistics, by far the largest share of the world's Christian population in 2050 will be African, with 32 percent of the global total. South Americans will make up 21 percent of the whole, a number that grows if we include people of Latino origin in North America. In short, well over half of all Christians alive in 2050 will be either African or Latin American. When we recall the distribution of Christians as recently as 1970, that is an incredible global change to occur in basically just two or three generations.

REASONS FOR CAUTION

I should explain here why I have raised some flags about accepting the WCD figures without some care. In Table 2, I list the world's largest Christian communities according to that source. Two problems arise, illustrating the methodological difficulty of quantifying faith. In the case of Britain, for instance, the estimated figure of fifty million basically reflects every resident of the country not openly identified with some other religion. It certainly suggests nothing about actual Christian practice or commitment, or even the number of people who might admit to some kind of Christian identification, however lukewarm, in a survey. I would suggest, therefore, that the WCD exaggerate the number of Christian believers to be found in traditionally Christian countries that historically supported state churches, which particularly affects our sense of the level of Christian belief in Europe. However much Europe's importance in the Christian world seems to have fallen over the past century, the WCD statistics actually understate that decline.

Equally problematic are the WCD estimates for countries where Christianity is strictly regulated or regarded with widespread suspicion by government or rival religious communities. Nobody doubts that countries like India and China have sizable Christian populations over and above portrayed by the official statistics of those nations. But how large are these shadow populations? Many observers would be suspicious of the very large Christian populations implied for China (115 million) and India (58 million). In India, for instance, official government data suggest a Christian population of around 23 million, which everyone knows to be an underestimate. Millions of Christians, especially among the poor, are nervous about openly admitting their faith in the face of potential persecution from fundamentalist Hindu groups. But a consensus of informed estimates puts India's real Christian population at around 40 million, rather than 58 million. Chinese data are even more open to speculation, and the WCD number of 115 million stands at the summit of likely estimates. I personally would place the probable number of Chinese Christians well below that, perhaps at a half of the WCD figure. I may well be wrong, but in this matter, neither I nor the scholars of the WCD really have any firm data on which to rely.

If the WCD figure for present-day adherents is inflated, then so are all projections for coming decades. These numbers in particular raise major difficulties for projecting Christian strength in Asia in years to come. I would suggest that the projected number of Asian Christians in 2050 – over 600 million – may well be a considerable over-estimate. As remarked, though, I do not have more solid evidence on which to base a rival figure.

WHAT THE CHANGE MEANS

If the world's Christian population was redistributed according to different geographic or ethnic patterns, that would be a matter of minor significance, a factoid perhaps, but not a change of real substance. However, the kinds of Christianity that are emerging and growing have very distinct characteristics from what the Euro-American world regards as familiar or mainstream. As we will see, the newer kinds of Christianity are strongly charismatic in tone, presenting a very different image from the "mainline" faith of North America or Europe.

The reasons for this difference are open to debate. Some observers might explain the ecstatic and charismatic nature of the newer churches in terms of the older and hitherto dominant cultures in regions of Christian growth, for instance the continuing impact of traditional and primal faiths in Africa. Other differences derive from the very fact of newness. As sociologists of religion have long known, new and merging religious bodies tend to have particular characteristics, which mark them as sects rather than as churches. Neither of these terms, I hasten to add, has any derogatory sense, but is rather employed as a convenient label for a package of beliefs and characteristics. But sects, generally, tend to be more passionate and enthusiastic about their faith, more charismatic in tone, with a greater sense of the potential for miraculous intervention. They also encourage stronger lay and non-clerical involvement. The "sect" model does include many of the features commonly attributed to rising new churches whether in Africa, Asia or Latin America.

But whatever the reasons, newer churches – and the churches that will increasingly dominate the global ecclesiastical scene – tend to focus on certain key issues of belief, theology and practice,

which set them apart from the older bodies of the Global North. In very general terms, I will sketch some of the key differences, which will probably become ever more salient in Christian thought in the coming decades.

Obviously I am not suggesting that these characteristics enjoy some kind of geographical privilege, that they exist in Africa not Europe. I can easily point to European or US churches that share many of these same issues and features. My concern is in identifying the mainstream of belief and concern in respective regions.

CRITICAL THEMES

With that caveat in mind, I would identify certain pressing theological questions that arise from the global shift in Christian faith. I will touch briefly on these issues, which I have discussed at greater length in my other writings, and which have also been discussed at length by such excellent scholars as Lamin Sanneh, Mark Noll and John Allen¹:

Charismatic Faith

As noted earlier, any observation of the fastest growing churches across the Global South stresses their charismatic quality. They preach messages that, to the familiar Western mainline churches, appear simplistically charismatic, not to mention 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. This does not necessarily mean that these newer bodies belong to one of the historic Pentecostal denominations, but rather that they act in similar ways, whatever their polity or church labels. This is true of Anglicans and even Catholics as well as Baptists and Presbyterians.

The supreme challenge for Christian theology in the coming decades is the rediscovery of pneumatology, the theory of the workings of the Holy Spirit, and this task will span churches and denominations.

Deliverance and Spiritual Warfare

If there is a single critical marker distinguishing the Christianity of the modern West from the New Testament world, it is the basic belief in the supernatural character of evil, which is manifested equally in sickness, repression, wickedness and compulsiveness. The North-South divide is not absolute, and some Euro-American Christians accept theories of the diabolic and demonic, of supernatural warfare and spiritual healing. Yet most Northern-world Christians share the bemusement, the mockery, with which the more secular-minded regard such manifestations. For post-Enlightenment Christians in the West, the demonic elements in the New Testament mean so little that they are scarcely even an embarrassment anymore. Many Westerners read over such passages and attribute them to a long-departed stage of scientific development. Yet the supernatural approach certainly harks back to the ancient roots of Christianity.

To read the gospels is to make the intimate acquaintance of demons and demonic forces. Arguing for a social justice approach to Christianity, Jim Wallis rightly points out that excising references to “the poor” leaves very little of the biblical text intact. But by the same principle, precious little is left of the New Testament after we purge all mentions of angels, demons, and spirits. Shorn of healing and miraculous cures, the four gospels would be a slim pamphlet indeed. Large sections of the new Christianity assume a spiritual universe quite different from the view of mainline Western churches.

Healing

Demonology is thus credible for African and Asian churches, in a way it can scarcely be for most educated Westerners, and so are ideas of exorcism and healing. Unless we appreciate the central role of healing, we can hardly understand the shape of modern Christianity globally. The emphasis on health and healing is not going to go away anytime soon, given the pervasive character of sickness in developing societies. Worse, hospital facilities there are so crowded and unhygienic as to deter many from seeking formal medical assistance, however bad their situation. This puts a premium on institutions that provide healing through spiritual means; a mission that is absolutely central to the fastest-growing churches of Africa, Latin America and the Pacific Rim communities. Such churches offer a culture of spectacle through great healing missions, revivals and miracle crusades. Other institutions win supporters by dispensing medical services through volunteer doctors and paramedics, a ministry undertaken by Christian missionaries, as by fundamentalist mosques. I quote the sermon of a leader of the West African Mosama Disco Christo Church, who tells his followers that "We are all here in this church because we have found healing here. But for this church, the great majority of us here assembled would not be alive today. That is the reason why we are here." The point is so obvious in Africa, and so very strange to Western believers. Even African Mennonites are, of course, a healing church. How could they be otherwise?

Notions of healing and exorcism are anything but new in the Christian context: witness two thousand years of saints' lives and tales of miraculous shrines. But in the past half century, these ideas have returned to the forefront of Christian expansion as broadly charismatic and Pentecostal churches have experienced the most explosive growth worldwide. And instead of being confined to inspiring stories of holy heroes in ages past, healing is now the expectation of ordinary believers in every tin-roofed Pentecostal church.

John Allen has ably explored this change in the context of the Roman Catholic Church, which is still the world's largest religious institution. While the Roman Catholic Church has always regarded itself as "One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic," Allen sees the coming Southward-weighted institution as "Global, Uncompromising, Pentecostal, and Extroverted." That a Southern-rooted Catholic Church will be charismatic or Pentecostal seems almost inevitable. Whether it can be Pentecostal enough to retain the loyalty of its members – sufficiently flexible to admit the power of religious gifts outside the traditional hierarchical structures - is an open question.

Denominations and Labels

When Americans ask me the most important thing they need to know about Christian life in Africa, for example, I always reply that first and foremost, they need to abandon their familiar assumptions about ecclesiastical parties and denominations. Western observers of global South Christianity often try, unsuccessfully, to impose familiar categories upon it, familiar divisions between left and right, between conservative and liberal, between otherworldly charismatics and this-worldly social activists. Countless American examples demonstrate the flaws in this analysis, but in the churches of the global South, the division makes even less sense. Christianity only makes sense as a faith that heals – heals the body, the soul and the spirit, as well as healing society and community. Deliverance and liberation are one. Similarly, forms of behavior and practice span denominations in ways that seem strange in a Western context, so that concepts like "evangelical", "liturgical," "catholic" and "charismatic" can be combined in ways that seem utterly bizarre to mainline Westerners.

Minorities

For many centuries, Western Christians have lived in societies virtually lacking in any form of religious competition. Some have succeeded in forming an accommodation with tiny Jewish minorities, while others, of course, have failed miserably in this endeavor. The main rivals for the loyalty of the faithful have long been secular movements, whether socialist or Communist, liberal or fascist. Often too, Christians have enjoyed political power, allowing them to shape the wider society as they saw fit. The fact of majority status long went unquestioned.

In the Global South, of course, Christianity emerges in quite different settings, against the background of ancient and deeply established rival faiths. Christians must therefore learn to live as minorities, with all that implies for the constraints placed on overt evangelism and proselytizing. What happens when the main interlocutors in religious debate operate from assumptions quite different from those of secular critics, when the rivals assume as a given the existence and power of a personal God who intervenes directly in human affairs, and seek rather to clarify the nature of His revelation?

The central fact of African religious history during the twentieth century was the conversion of about half the continental population from animism or primal religions to Christianity and Islam; about forty percent to Christianity, ten percent to Islam. African Christians must, therefore, on a daily basis, negotiate their relationships to both animism and to Islam, determining the acceptable limits of compromise. The process of determining the relationship to paganism is of course a story very familiar to scholars of the early Church. The interaction with Islam poses quite different problems, which if handled wrongly can lead to serious bloodshed.

Asian Christians face problems scarcely less severe in their interactions with ancient literate faiths such as Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism. Believers wish to shape and protect a social space for themselves, preserving good relations while remaining steadfast against any temptation to syncretism. To determine this, they must constantly draw on Biblical examples and precedents.

Islam

Each of the rival faiths poses its particular issues and dangers, but perhaps none so much as Islam, which in its origins shares so many common assumptions with Christianity. Much modern scholarship suggests early forms of parallel development far closer than we might have suspected. Some see major survivals of Christian texts within the Quran itself, and trace Christian origins for many Muslim religious practices.

The question then remains as another pressing theological challenge of the new century: what is, and what should be, the relationship between Christianity and Islam? Is Islam a separate religion, as distinct from Christianity as Shinto or Hinduism, or are the two religions sisters separated at birth and raised in different family settings? Is Islam the offspring of the devil? Or is it a Christian heresy that could somehow be brought back into the fold? And the Quran: is it legitimately a prophetic scripture, revealed by God? Multiculturalism might demand accepting such a position, but if you go so far, what prevents you from going all the way, and becoming a Muslim? At what point must a desire to coexist with another world religion give way to the urgent necessity to draw and enforce lines of orthodoxy?

And what about Christian evangelism toward Muslims, even assuming that this is ever a practical possibility? Are Muslims members of a distinct religion, in need of receiving the Christian revelation, or do they already possess the truth in sufficient measure to make such efforts unnecessary and undesirable? Many Christian churches in Europe and North America, especially of liberal inclination, have already decided against the propriety of evangelizing Jews, since to do so would be to condemn the Jewish Covenant as invalid and obsolete. But do Muslims too have a valid path to God?

Different Ways Of Reading The Bible

In other ways too, Christians in the new churches must once again ask some ancient questions, reopening debates that the West thought were long settled. Some of the most critical concern the correct way of reading the Bible itself. Any acquaintance with African or Asian Christianity soon indicates the pervasive importance of the Bible and of biblical stories. The Bible has found a congenial home among communities who identify with the social and economic realities it portrays, no less than the political environments in which Christians find themselves. Cultures that readily identify with biblical worldviews find it easier to read the Bible not just as historical fact, but as relevant instruction for daily conduct.

Reading the Bible through “Southern” eyes helps Western believers appreciate the Bible as an immediate contemporary document, and makes it hard to see the Bible as simply a historical text. I do not claim that contemporary Africans or Asians have received prophetic insight that allows them the power of precisely correct interpretation of the first century Mediterranean world. Often, their readings probably are wide of the mark, and they wrongly apply modern understandings to the ancient world. But in many instances, these contemporary readings are deeply enlightening. And the more immediately one understands the Biblical world, the easier it becomes to accept the authority of the text. In the words of one liberal African theologian, Kenya’s Musimbi Kanyoro, “Those cultures which are far removed from biblical culture risk reading the Bible as fiction.” How strange: reading the Bible as fiction!

Writing of contemporary Central America, novelist Francisco Goldman remarks that

Guatemala certainly feels biblical. Sheep, swine, donkeys, serpents—these are everywhere, as are centurions, all manner of wandering false prophets, pharisees, lepers and whores. The poor, rural, mainly Mayan landscape has an aura of the miraculous. . . . [It] is the perfect backdrop for religious parables about fields both barren and fertile, fruits and harvests, hunger and plenty.

Across Africa and Asia, millions of modern readers know roads where a traveler is likely to be robbed and left for dead, without much hope of intervention by official agencies. They relate to accounts of streets teeming with the sick. They understand that a poor woman who loses a tiny sum of money would search frantically for coins that could allow her children to eat that night. In many countries, readers appreciate the picture of the capricious rich man, who offers hospitality on one occasion, but on another day demands payment of exorbitant debts and obligations, and who must not on any account be offended. Today, though, the person would not be a generic magnate or Hellenistic princeling, but a corrupt official of a ruling party.

The Old Testament

Specifically, for these “new eyes”, the relationship between different portions of the Bible is an issue of lively discussion. For many American Christians, who may love the stories of the ancient Hebrew world, it is all too obvious that these arise from an utterly different social and economic setting, which is of limited practical relevance to a modern society. In contrast, it is precisely the Old Testament world that speaks in contemporary tones to many African and Asian Christians. I quote for instance Madipoane Masenya, a feminist liberal theologian from contemporary South Africa: “If present day Africans still find it difficult to be at home with the Old Testament, they might need to watch out to see if they have not lost their Africanness in one way or the other.” Could a comparable observation conceivably be made of contemporary Europeans or North Americans?

Cultural affinities with the biblical world lead African and Asian Christians to a deep affection for the Old Testament as their story, their book. In Africa particularly, Christians have long been excited by the obvious cultural parallels that exist between their own societies and those of the Hebrew Old Testament, especially the world of the patriarchs. While the vast majority of modern Africans have no direct experience of nomadism or polygamy, at least they can relate to the kind of society in which such practices were commonplace. Many are also thoroughly familiar with notions of blood sacrifice, of atonement through blood.

If the Old Testament world makes sense to modern Africans, if they see it as a recognizable parallel to their own world, this makes it much easier to accept the moral and even legal prescriptions laid down in those books. Not only does the Bible carry special authority as a divinely inspired text, but this respect must be paid to larger portions of the text than would be customary for many Northern-world Christians. If not quite a different book, the Bible of the South is perhaps a good deal larger than its Northern counterpart.

CONCLUSION

Obviously, I have outlined these implications in the briefest possible terms, and we could easily think of many other consequences of the current global shift. But let in conclusion, let me draw two obvious points.

First, the current changes in Christianity are unprecedented in scale, and might even dwarf the revolutionary transformation that we call the Reformation.

Second, any understanding of the current changes demands the mastery of a wide range of disciplines, in the study of society and economics as much as theology, but perhaps more than anything, it demands a strong sense of history. After all, so many of the “new” questions that will face the churches in coming decades are anything but new. Rather, they were debates and controversies deeply familiar to the most primitive church, and in many subsequent eras. Without knowing that history, that prehistory, we will be doomed to a constant reinvention of the wheel.

Although the words are often-quoted, please excuse me if I end with some apposite words from T. S. Eliot:

We shall not cease from exploration
 And the end of all our exploring
 Will be to arrive where we started
 And know the place for the first time.

¹ Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (Oxford University Press, 2006); Lamin Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Mark A. Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith* (IVP Academic, 2009); John L. Allen, Jr., *The Future Church: How Ten Trends are Revolutionizing the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 2009)

TABLE 1

THE CHANGING DISTRIBUTION OF CHRISTIAN BELIEVERS

	CHRISTIANS (millions)			
	<i>1900</i>	<i>1970</i>	<i>2010</i>	<i>2050</i>
AFRICA	10	143	493	1,031
ASIA	22	96	352	601
NORTH AMERICA	79	211	286	333
SOUTH AMERICA	62	270	544	655
EUROPE	381	492	588	530
OCEANIA	5	18	28	38
TOTAL	558	1,230	2,291	3,188

SOURCE: World Christian Database, <http://www.worldchristiandatabase.org/wcd/>

TABLE 2
THE LARGEST CHRISTIAN POPULATIONS 2010

<i>NATION</i>	<i>Number of Christians</i> <i>(millions)</i>
USA	260
Brazil	177
China	115
Russia	115
Mexico	106
Philippines	84
Nigeria	72
D.R. Congo	65
Germany	58
India	58
Britain	50
Ethiopia	50

SOURCE: World Christian Database, <http://www.worldchristiandatabase.org/wcd/>