

Philip Jenkins. *The Next Christendom:  
The Coming of Global Christianity.*  
Revised and Expanded Edition.  
New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Reviewed by Mark L. Grover

The headline of an article announcing the May 2007 visit of Pope Benedict XVI to South America reads, “Pope to Visit ‘Pentecostalized’ Brazil.”<sup>1</sup> To anyone familiar with worldwide Catholicism, the suggestion that Brazil, the most Catholic country in the world, is “pentecostalized,” is an eye-opener. The article, however, is correct. Brazil, along with much of the Southern Hemisphere, is experiencing a religious transformation and revival that could parallel in importance the Protestant Reformation in Europe during the sixteenth century. This book by Philip Jenkins is a landmark publication that renders an important overview of the evolving nature of worldwide Christianity.

The 2002 first edition of Dr. Jenkins’s book won several awards, including being named as one of the top ten religious books of the year by both *USA Today* and *Booklist*. The first edition of this volume was written before the 9/11 destruction of the World Trade Center towers, and Jenkins felt that experience so changed the world that the book should be updated. His additions place Christianity in the post-9/11 world in which we now live. He also includes a discussion of the present conflict in the Anglican faith that supports his ideas concerning the nature of Protestantism outside of Europe and the United States.

Jenkins’s thesis is that what might be characterized as “Western Christianity” has been decreasing in influence worldwide in favor of a new religious construct he designates “Southern Christianity.” Christianity, as some authors have suggested, is not decreasing in size in favor of secularism or Islam but is alive and well though changed. The second component of his argument is that the religious foundation of this expansion is evolving from Pentecostal-Charismatic structures and practices. The fastest growing of these movements are theologically conservative and have a strong belief in the supernatural.

Jenkins's ideas are not new to many Christian scholars, particularly those who study the growth and expansion of religion. Popular academic books such as Harvey Cox's *Fire from Heaven* (1995) and David Stoll's *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?* (1990) have examined some of these issues previously. Mainstream Northern Christian scholarship, however, often fails to acknowledge the movements, particularly into Africa, choosing instead to continue to focus on European-based and liberal Christianity. Jenkins correctly places the debate and dismissal as a secularly influenced ideological conflict. For the last century, European and American scholars, influenced by secular concepts of modernization, have made the commonplace assumption that Christianity is on the decline and will ultimately disappear. This ideology suggests that the empty pews and the graying of the congregations prove that traditional Christianity is irrelevant in a scientific and reason-based society. The only way to avoid the complete disappearance of religion is to abandon outdated "supernatural doctrines and moral assumptions" (10), change its beliefs on miracles and gender, and become more modern (secular).

Jenkins points out that these conflicts are ideological assumptions with limited connection to the reality of what is happening. He shows that these pessimistic ideas on religion could not be more wrong when looking at global Christianity. Not only has growth occurred within Christianity, but that growth has also been significant in the young adult population, creating vibrant and active movements. The growth of Southern Christianity is of such importance that Jenkins suggests that the center of Christianity in the near future will not be Europe or North America but Latin America and Africa.

The Mormon connection that Jenkins acknowledges in a one-page discussion is fairly obvious (76). The demographic change that is happening to Christianity is mirrored in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Europe, historically the font for LDS growth, is experiencing a significant decrease in the number of converts. Missions are being consolidated, and the number of missionaries is significantly decreasing. Decreasing birthrates among the members also continue to shrink the congregations. A significant percentage of the few converts to Mormonism are coming from the immigrant populations in Europe, principally from Africa and Latin America. Growth of Mormonism in the United States and Canada continues to be significantly higher than in Europe, but here again, the number of immigrants joining the Church is a significant percentage of that growth.

In terms of numbers, the center of Mormonism is shifting. Though the growth rate in Latin America has declined in the past five years,

the baptismal rate is still higher than anywhere else in the world. With a continuation of this growth, the number of baptized members in Latin America will be greater than the rest of the Church within fifteen years. The issue of retention still creates challenges, but the Latin Americanization of the LDS faith continues to occur. As Jenkins suggests, “This church represents another of the great success stories in modern Latin American religion” (76).

The African growth of the LDS faith is a story that is just beginning. Though the Church in Africa is still small and has been affected by its very recent history, political challenges, and a deliberate slowing of growth, the potential for Church expansion in Africa could become something that has never been experienced or contemplated in Mormon history.

In other ways, however, Mormonism does not fit well in Jenkins’s model. Though the Church is growing, its expansion is slow in comparison to the movements Jenkins is profiling. The LDS movement is a beneficiary of the environment that is encouraging religious change, but in outright comparison the Church is a minor player more than a major participant. Mormons are visually recognized because of their missionaries, temples, and chapels, but the numbers joining the Church pale in comparison to most of the Evangelical movements. Latter-day Saints are also not recognized as part of the movement in part because of their failure to use the media the way Evangelical groups do. LDS converts are often teenagers and young adults, but the economic level of the members is higher than the average of those in Evangelical churches.

Mormons are also different theologically. Though they exhibit some of the traits espoused by the Evangelical movement such as sexual and moral conservatism, they do not fit in other ways. LDS conservatism is an American conservatism based on middle-class family values. They are attractive to some Latin Americans but are futurist ideals that do little to help in the realities of day-to-day living in the Third World. Mormon supernatural activities, though very much a part of the religious experience, are constrained, individual, and mostly private, unlike the communal, intense experiences of the Evangelicals. LDS worship services appear outwardly more like those of liberal Protestant churches and are unlike the lively, animated, and spontaneous services that are common with Evangelicals and Charismatic Catholics. Lastly, the Evangelicals can expand and grow much faster because of the belief in a priesthood of the believers, whereas Mormonism experiences a methodical, often plodding growth in which almost everything is controlled by priesthood authority from above.

In a book of this nature there is always room for criticism related to detail, which I will not undertake. This is a book about ideas and change,

not detail. The importance of this book is that it focuses mainline religious scholarship on the reality of the Christian world, not on secular ideological preferences. It suggests we are seeing not the death of Christianity but a vibrant restructuring of a religious movement that will continue to have an important influence worldwide. Jenkins carefully suggests that the Christianity of the future is somewhat of a return to a Christianity closer to its origins than the Western version developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He also extends a call to scholars to investigate and study this new version of Christianity. It will be through this type of research that the misunderstanding and lack of acceptance will disappear and an appreciation of what is developing will occur. That call can also be made to many Mormon scholars who seem fixated on the American foundations of a religion that is going through transformations that many do not understand or appreciate. There is a lot to be discovered, understood, and appreciated about Mormonism south of the Rio Grande River and beyond the Mediterranean Sea.

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1. See the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life Weekly Update, April 19, 2007, at <http://pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=199>.