



The Disappearance of Christianity in Its Homeland

Posted GMT 4-7-2009 22:15:57

The Lost History of Christianity

The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia--and How It Died

By Philip Jenkins

HarperOne, 336 pp., \$26.95

In the summer of 2002, I traveled in southeastern Turkey to meet with members of the two-millennia-old Syriac church, of whom only a few thousand are left in their homelands. Their language, Syriac-Aramaic, is as close as any living language to the one that Jesus spoke, yet they are forbidden by the Turkish government to teach it to their schoolchildren. We came to deserted villages such as Kafro, whose inhabitants had been driven out by the attacks of Turkish Hezbollah, and which were now sealed off by the military. We visited the monastery of Tur Abdin, a major center of Eastern Christianity, now dwindling under suffocating government restrictions. We met the only two monks remaining in the monastery of the village of Sare.

In Nisibis (now Nusaybin in southeast Turkey), where a famous Christian community dates back to the second century, and which nurtured Ephrem, the greatest of the Syrian theologians, there is a church dating from 439. It was locked and abandoned after World War I when the inhabitants, fleeing massacre, escaped into Syria. For 60 years there had been no Christians there, but now the diocese had sent a Christian family from a local village, who live in a small apartment in the church and try to keep it from falling apart.

We went into the crypt to see the tomb of Jacob of Nisibis, from whom the term "Jacobite" church is named, and while we studied his sarcophagus, our driver, unprompted, began to sing an ancient hymn. His strong voice filled the tomb. We asked him what the words meant, and he told us that the lyrics came from Ephrem himself:

Listen, my chicks have flown, left their nest, alarmed By the eagle. Look, where they hide in dread. Bring them back in peace.

Philip Jenkins's marvelous new book, *The Lost History of Christianity*, tells the largely forgotten story of Nisibis, and thousands of sites like it, which stretch from Morocco to Kenya to India to China, and which were, deep into the second millennium, the heart of the church. While Christians will be particularly concerned with this story, it will be of interest to, and significant for, far more than they.

After an already distinguished career as a historian, Jenkins has, during the last six years, produced a series of books designed to inform modern readers of the religious shape of the world we inhabit, a shape radically different from that of the popular, or even not-so-popular, mind. While much of what he has written will be of little surprise to specialists, he has a gift for clearly and cogently synthesizing and summarizing copious research. *The Next Christendom* (2002) described how Christianity's demographic center of gravity, in the 20th century, moved to the Third World. *The New Faces of Christianity* (2006) argued that, since their culture is closer to the Bible, Africans and Asians understand the book very differently from Europeans and North Americans, and find in it a great liberatory force. *God's Continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe's Religious Crisis* (2007) found in Europe much more than fading Christianity and growing Islam.

The story usually told of Christianity is that, while it certainly also spread elsewhere, its major influence and home was in Europe. The church developed early, Europe became in some sense Christianized, and subsequently it set the pattern for the faith. With the discovery of America and the European voyages of exploration, as well as colonialism, Christianity then spread to the rest of the world largely as a Western export.

Jenkins demonstrates that this story is flat wrong--or as he more charitably puts it, "much of what we know is inaccurate."

For most of its history, Christianity was a tricontinental religion, with powerful representation in Europe, Africa and Asia, and this was true into the 14th century. Christianity became predominantly European not because this continent had any obvious affinity for that faith, but by default: Europe was the continent where it was not destroyed.

As late as the 11th century Asia was home to about a third of the world's Christians, Africa another 10 percent, and the faith in these continents had deeper roots in the culture than it did in Europe, where in many places it was newly arrived or still arriving.

Assyrian International News Agency

About the time of Charlemagne's investiture in 800, the patriarch, or catholicos, of the Church of the East, often called Nestorian, was Timothy, based in Seleucia, in Mesopotamia. In prestige and authority, Timothy was "arguably the most significant Christian spiritual leader of his day," much more influential than the Western pope and on par with the Orthodox patriarch in Constantinople. Perhaps a quarter of the world's Christians looked to him as their spiritual and political head. His duties included appointing bishops in Yemen, Arabia, Iran, Turkestan, Afghanistan, Tibet, India, Sri Lanka, and China. A Christian cemetery in Kyrgyzstan contains inscriptions in Syrian and Turkish commemorating "Terim the Chinese, Sazik the Indian, Banus the Uygur, Kiamata of Kashgar, and Tatt the Mongol." The Church of the East may even have reached to Burma, Vietnam, Indonesia, Japan, the Philippines, and Korea.

The Asian church was also more intellectually accomplished: Its operating languages were Syriac, Persian, Turkish, Soghdian, and Chinese. Timothy himself translated Aristotle's Topics from Syriac into Arabic. Much of the "Arab" scholarship of the time, such as translations of Plato, Aristotle, Hippocrates, Galen, and others into Arabic, or the adoption of the Indian numbering system, was in fact done by Syriac, Persian, and Coptic (Egyptian and Nubian) Christians, often in the high employ of the Caliph.

It was also a church immersed in cultures very different from the Roman and Hellenic environments of the West. Timothy engaged in a famous dialogue with the caliph al-Mahdi, which still survives. The church's milieu was not only Jewish and Muslim but also, perhaps more so, Buddhist, Manichaean, Zoroastrian, and Confucian. This made for relations that defy many of our usual assumptions about history. Jenkins recounts how "in 782, the Indian Buddhist missionary Prajna arrived in the Chinese imperial capital of Chang'an, but was unable to translate the Sanskrit sutras he had brought" into Chinese or other useful local languages.

Hence, Prajna did the obvious thing and consulted with Bishop Adam, head of the Chinese church, who was deeply interested in understanding Buddhism. As a result, "Buddhist and Nestorian scholars worked amiably together for some years to translate seven copious volumes of Buddhist wisdom." These same volumes were taken back home by Japanese monks who had been in Chang'an, and became the founding volumes of Shingon and Tendai, the two great schools of Japanese Buddhism.

The Chinese also influenced the West. Around 1275, two Chinese monks began a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. One, Markos, was probably a Uygur and the other, Bar Sauma, may have been an Onggud. In 1281, Markos was elected patriarch. He protested that he was not up to it, not least because his knowledge of Syriac was rudimentary. But the church fathers argued that the "kings who held the steering poles of the government of the whole world were the [Mongols], and there was no man except [him] who was acquainted with their manners and customs." Markos established his seat near Tabriz, then the capital of the Mongol Ilkhan dynasty.

Bar Sauma had an equally interesting life. In 1287 the Ilkhan overlord sent him on a diplomatic mission to Europe to enlist aid for a proposed joint assault on Mamluk Egypt: Kublai Khan in Beijing would also be a supporter. The Europeans were amazed to discover both that the church stretched to the shores of the Pacific and that the emissary from the fearsome Mongols was a Christian bishop, one from whom the king of England subsequently took communion.

Jenkins places the ending of this world, "the decisive collapse of Christianity in the Middle East, across Asia, and in much of Africa," not with the initial rise of Islam but in the 14th century. One trigger was the Mongol invasions, which threatened Arab Islam as never before. (The Crusades were a minor sideshow.) The Mongols sought alliances with Christians, and there were Christians among them, hence local believers were treated as a potential fifth column and often massacred.

Later, the Mongols themselves embraced Islam and turned on the Christians. Timur's subsequent invasions, among the most brutal in history, furthered the process, as did Seljuk and Ottoman advances and, further east, rising anti-Mongol Chinese nationalism. Between 1200 and 1500 the proportion of Christians outside Europe fell from over a third to about 6 percent. By 1500 the European church had become dominant "by dint of being, so to speak, the last men standing" of the Christian world.

The eastern communities were savaged again in a second great wave of persecution beginning in the 19th century, with the slaughter of the Armenians, and also the Syriacs, Nestorians, and Maronites. When the British took over Mesopotamia after the First World War, they judged the Assyrians' situation so desperate that they considered moving them to Canada. In 1930 there were proposals to transfer them to South America. Following massacres by Arabs in 1933, the British flew the patriarch to Cyprus for safety while the League of Nations debated moving them to Brazil or Niger. We may currently be in another such wave as Christians flee the Palestinian areas, Lebanon, Turkey, and Egypt. In 2003 in Iraq, Christians were some 4 percent of the population, but they have since comprised 40 percent of the refugees.

As Jenkins says, "We have forgotten a world." The "new" globalized Christianity "is better seen as a resumption of an ancient reality." He explores the pervasive influence of Christianity on Islam, and it is always good to see the woolly writings of Karen Armstrong and Elaine Pagels taken apart, albeit gently.

This book has few weaknesses. It would have been good to explore the major cultural effects of the different role of language in Christian and Islamic missions: the former seeking to bring the Word into the locals' languages, the latter seeking to bring the locals the Word in

Arabic.

In the late 10th century a Nestorian monk from Arabia visiting China reported his horror at discovering that Christianity had, after centuries, by then become "extinct." But Christianity is now in its fourth phase of expansion in China : More people there go to church than do in Europe . Perhaps Ephrem's hymn and prayer will be answered: "Bring them back in peace."

By Paul Marshall
The Weekly Standard

Paul Marshall is a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom and the editor of Blind Spot: When Journalists Don't Get Religion.

© 2011, Assyrian International News Agency. All Rights Reserved. [Terms of Use.](#)