
Be Still.

THOUGHTS AND READINGS FOR MEDITATION 51

The Coming of Global Christianity



*“This book startles, informs,
and invites careful reflection
about the future of the Christian
movement, which is obviously
far from over.”*

REV. RICHARD JOHN NEUHAUS

**“The kingdoms of this world have become
the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ;
and he shall reign for ever and ever.”**

Rev. 11:15

Contrary to conventional liberal thinking in the West, traditional and theologically conservative Christianity is booming in the 3rd World. Philip Jenkins points how baseless is the assumption that Islam will overtake Christianity. He rightly urges Westerners to drop our parochialism and recognise that one of the most powerful forces on the world stage is booming and expanding Third World Christianity. Jenkins' book is an excellent guide to a future in which religious conflict will become more important on the world stage as Third World Christians challenge Moslem persecution. While this is a troubling scenario, the book also presents good news for those in the West who defend orthodox Christianity. Our best allies are in the Third World.

Excerpts from *The Next Christendom* by Philip Jenkins

The end of the twentieth century was marked by an obsessive compilation of retrospective lists, which assessed the greatest moments and the most important individuals of the previous hundred years. Some observers, still more ambitious, tried to identify the high and low points of the whole millennium then passing. Yet in all these efforts, religious matters received remarkably short shrift. After all, the attitude seemed to be, what religious change in recent years could possibly compete in importance with the major secular trends, movements like fascism or communism, feminism or environmentalism? To the contrary, I suggest that it is precisely religious changes that are the most significant, and even the most revolutionary, in the contemporary world. Before too long, the turn-of-the-millennium neglect of religious factors may come to be seen as comically myopic.

We are currently living through one of the most transforming moments in the history of religion worldwide. Over the past five centuries or so, the story of Christianity has been inextricably bound up with that of European or European-driven civilisations, above all in North America. Until recently, the overwhelming majority of Christians have lived in White nations, allowing theorists to speak arrogantly of “European Christian” civilisation. Conversely, radical writers have seen Christianity as an ideological arm of Western imperialism. Many of us share the stereotype of Christianity as the religion of the “West” or, “the global North”. It is self-evidently the religion of the “haves”. To adapt the phrase once applied to the increasingly conservative U.S. electorate of the 1970s, the stereotype holds that Christians are un-Black, un-poor, and un-young. If this is so, the West's growing secularisation can only mean Christianity is in its dying days. Globally, the faith of the future must be Islam.

Over the past century, however, the centre of gravity in the Christian world has shifted inexorably southward, to Africa, Asia and Latin America. If we want to visualise a “typical” contemporary Christian, we should think of a woman living in a village in Nigeria or in a Brazilian *favela*. As Kenyan scholar John Mbiti has observed, “the centres of the church’s universality [are] no longer in Geneva, Rome, Athens, Paris, London, New York, but Kinshasa, Buenos Aires, Addis Ababa and Manila.” Whatever we Westerners may believe, Christianity is doing very well indeed in the global South—not just surviving but expanding.

The trend will continue apace in coming years. Many of the fastest-growing countries in the world are either predominantly Christian or else have very sizable Christian minorities. Even if Christians just maintain their present share of the population in countries like Nigeria and Kenya, Mexico and Ethiopia, Brazil and the Philippines, there will soon be several hundred million more Christians from those nations alone. Moreover, conversions will swell the Christian share of world population. Meanwhile, historically low birth rates in the traditionally Christian states of Europe mean that these populations are declining or stagnant. In 1950, a list of the world’s leading Christian countries would have included Britain, France, Spain and Italy, but none of these names would be represented in a corresponding list for 2050.

Christianity should enjoy a worldwide boom in the new century, but the vast majority of believers will be neither white nor European, nor Euro-American. If we extrapolate current figures from the respected *World Christian Encyclopaedia*, Africa and Latin America would be in competition for the title of most Christian continent by 2025. About this date, another significant milestone should occur, namely that these two continents will together account for half the Christians on the planet. By 2050, only about one-fifth of the world’s 3 billion Christians will be non-Hispanic Whites. Soon, the phrase “a White Christian” may sound like a curious oxymoron.

This global perspective should make us think carefully before asserting “what Christians believe” or “how the church is changing.” All too often, statements about what “modern Christians accept” refer only to what the ever-shrinking remnant of *Western* Christians believes. Such assertions are outrageous today, and as time goes by they will become ever further removed from reality. The era of Western Christianity has passed within our lifetimes, and the day of Southern Christianity is dawning. The fact of change itself is undeniable: it has happened, and will continue to happen. So little did we notice this momentous change

that is was barely mentioned in all the media hoopla at the end of the second millennium.

The “Strange” New Christianity

If there is one thing we can reliably predict about the 21st century, it is that an increasing share of the world’s people is going to identify with one of two religions, either Christianity or Islam, and the two have a long and disastrous record of conflict and mutual incomprehension. For the sake of both religion and politics, and perhaps of simple planetary survival, it is vitally necessary for Christian and Jewish North-erners to gain a better understanding of Islam. But odd as it may sound, perhaps the more pressing need is to appreciate that other religious giant, the strangely unfamiliar world of the new Christianity. Southern Christianity is not just a transplanted version of the familiar religion of the older Christian states: the New Christendom is no mirror image of the Old. It is a truly new and developing entity. Just how different it is from its predecessor remains to be seen.

Studying Christianity in a predominantly Christian society can pose surprising difficulties. I teach in a religious studies program which, like most of its counterparts in universities across the United States, introduces students to the global dimensions of religious experience. In practice, that means providing a wide range of courses on the World Religions, but the main religion that tends to suffer in this package is Christianity, which receives nothing like the attention it merits in terms of its numbers and global scale. Whatever the value of Christian claims to truth, it cannot be considered as just one religion out of many: it is, and will continue to be, by far the largest in existence. A generation ago, the neglect of Christianity in academic teaching made more sense than it does today, in that students could be expected to absorb information about the faith from churches, families, or society at large. Today, that is often not a realistic expectation, and one encounters dazzling levels of ignorance about the basic facts of the religion.

If Christianity as such receives short shrift, the situation is still worse when it comes to the religion outside the West. Normally, textbooks discuss the faith in Africa and Asia chiefly in highly negative ways, in the context of genocide, slavery, and imperialism, and the voices of autonomous Christianity are rarely heard. Given the present and future distribution of Christians worldwide, a case can be made that understanding the religion in its non-Western context is a prime necessity for anyone seeking to understand the emerging world. American universities prize the goal of diversity in their teaching, introducing students to the thought-ways of Africa, Asia, and Latin

America, often by using texts from non-Western cultures. However strange this may sound in terms of conventional stereotypes, teaching about Christianity would be a wonderful way to teach diversity, all the more so now that this particular non-Western religion is returning to its roots.

Considering Christianity as a global reality can make us see the whole religion in a radically new perspective, which is startling and, often, uncomfortable. In fact, to adapt a phrase coined by theologian Marcus Borg, *it is as if we are seeing Christianity again for the first time*. In this encounter, we are forced to see the religion not just for what it is, but what it was in its origins and what it is going to be in the future. To take one example of these startling rediscoveries, Christianity is deeply associated with poverty. Contrary to myth, the typical Christian is not a White fat cat in the USA or western Europe, but rather a poor person, often unimaginably poor by Western standards.

The grim fact of Christian impoverishment becomes all the more true as Africa assumes its place as the religion’s principal centre. We are dealing with a continent that has endured countless disasters since independence, measured by statistics that become wearying by their unrelieved horror, whether we are looking at life expectancy, child mortality, or deaths from AIDS. Africa contributes less than 2 percent of the world’s total GDP, although it is home to 13 percent of world population, and the GDP for the whole of sub-Saharan Africa is equivalent to that of the Netherlands. Since the 1960s, Africa’s share of world trade has all but disappeared. Overall, “the continent is slipping out of the Third World into its own bleak category of the Nth World.” ...That is the underlying reality for the Christian masses of the new century.

African and Latin American Christians are people for whom the New Testament Beatitudes have a direct relevance inconceivable for most Christians in Northern societies. When Jesus told the “poor” they were blessed, the word used does not imply relative deprivation, it means total poverty, or destitution. The great majority of Southern Christians (and increasingly, of all Christians) really are the poor, the hungry, the persecuted, even the dehumanised. India has a perfect translation for Jesus’ word in the term *Dalit*, literally “crushed” or “oppressed.” This is how that country’s so-called Untouchables now choose to describe themselves: as we might translate the biblical phrase, *blessed are the Untouchables*.

Knowing all this should ideally have policy consequences, which are at least as urgent as redistributing church resources to meet the needs of shifting populations. Above all, the disastrous lot of so many Christians worldwide places urgent pressure on the

wealthy societies to assist the poor. When American Christians see the images of starvation from Africa, like the hellish visions from Ethiopia in the '80s, few realise that the victims share not just a common humanity, but in many cases the same religion. *Those are Christians starving to death.* Looking at Southern Christianity gives a surprising new perspective on some other things that might seem to be very familiar. Perhaps the most striking example is how the newer churches can read the Bible in a way that makes that Christianity look like a wholly different religion from the faith of prosperous advanced societies of Europe or North America. We have already seen that Southern churches are quite at home with biblical notions of the supernatural, with ideas like dreams and prophecy. Just as relevant in their eyes are the book's core social and political themes, like martyrdom, oppression, and exile. In the present day, it may be that it is only in the newer churches that the Bible can be read with any authenticity and immediacy, and that the Old Christendom must give priority to Southern voices. If Northern churches cannot help with clergy or missionaries or money, then perhaps they can reinterpret their own religion in light of these experiences.

So many basic New Testament assumptions seem just as alien in the global North as they do normal and familiar in the South. When Jesus was not talking about exorcism and healing, his recorded words devoted what today seems like an inordinate amount of attention to issues of persecution and martyrdom. He talked about what believers should do when on trial for the faith, how they should respond when expelled and condemned by families, villages and Jewish religious authorities. A large proportion of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, addresses the sufferings of God's people in the face of evil secular authorities.

As an intellectual exercise, modern Westerners can understand the historical circumstances that led to this emphasis on bloodshed and confrontation, but the passages concerned have little current relevance. Nor, for many, do the apocalyptic writings that are so closely linked to the theme of persecution and martyrdom, the visions of a coming world in which God will rule, persecutors will perish, and the righteous be vindicated. In recent decades, some New Testament scholars have tried to undermine the emphasis on martyrdom and apocalyptic in the New Testament by suggesting that these ideas did not come from Jesus' mouth, but were rather attributed to him by later generations. The real Jesus, in this view, was a rational Wisdom teacher much more akin to modern Western tastes, a kind of academic gadfly, rather than the ferocious "Doomsday Jesus" of the Synoptic Gospels,

and the book of Revelation is seen as a pernicious distortion of Christian truth.

For the average Western audience, New Testament passages about standing firm in the face of pagan persecution have little immediate relevance. But millions of Christians do in fact live in constant danger of persecution or forced conversion, from either governments or local vigilantes. For modern Christians in Nigeria, Egypt, the Sudan, or Indonesia, it is quite conceivable that they might someday find themselves before a tribunal that would demand that they renounce their faith upon pain of death. In all these varied situations, ordinary believers are forced to understand why they are facing these sufferings, and repeatedly they do so in the familiar language of the Bible and of earliest Christianity. To quote one Christian in Maluku, recent massacres and expulsions in that region are "according to God's plan. Christians are under purification from the Lord." The church in Sudan, victim of perhaps the most savage religious repression anywhere in the world, has integrated its sufferings into its liturgy and daily practice, and produced some moving literature in the process (*"Death has come to reveal the faith / It has begun with us and it will end with us"*).

Churches everywhere preach death and resurrection, but nowhere else are these realities such an immediate prospect. As in several other crisis regions, the oppressors in Sudan are Muslim, but elsewhere, they might be Christians of other denominations. In Guatemala or Rwanda, as in the Sudan, martyrdom is not merely a subject for historical research, it is a real prospect. As we move into the new century, the situation is likely to get worse rather than better.

Persecution is not confined to nations in such a state of extreme violence. Even where actual violence might not have occurred for months or years, there is a pervasive sense of threat, a need to be alert and avoid provocations. Hundreds of millions of Christians live in deeply divided societies, constantly needing to be acutely aware of their relationships with Muslim or Hindu neighbours.

Just as relevant to current concerns is exile, forcible removal from one's homeland, which forms the subject of so much of the Hebrew Bible. *About half the refugees in the world today are in Africa, and millions of these are Christian.* The wars that have swept over the Congo and Central Africa over the past decade have been devastating in uprooting communities. Often, it is the churches that provide the refugees with cohesion and community, and offer them hope, so that exile and return acquire powerfully religious symbolism. The themes of exile and return also exercise a powerful appeal for those removed voluntarily from their homelands, the tens of millions of

migrant workers who have sought better lives in the richer lands.

Read against the background of martyrdom and exile, it is not surprising that so many Christians look for promises that their sufferings are only temporary, and that God will intervene directly to save the situation. In this context, the book of Revelation looks like true prophecy on an epic scale, however unpopular or discredited it may be for most Westerners. In the South, Revelation simply makes sense in its description of a world ruled by monstrous demonic powers. These forces might be literal servants of Satan, or symbols for evil social forces, but in either case, they are indisputably real.

While it atrophies among the rich and secure, Christianity is flourishing wonderfully among the poor and persecuted. Using the traditional Marxist view of religion as the opium of the masses, it would be tempting to draw the conclusion that the religion actually does have a connection to underdevelopment and pre-modern cultural ways, and will disappear as society progresses. That conclusion would be fatuous, though, because very enthusiastic kinds of Christianity are also succeeding among professional and highly technologically oriented groups, notably around the Pacific Rim and in the United States. Yet the distribution of modern Christians might well show that the religion does succeed best when it takes very seriously the profound pessimism about the secular world that characterises the New Testament. If it is not exactly a faith based on the experience of poverty and persecution, then at least it regards these things as normal and expected elements of life. That view is not derived from complex theological reasoning, but is rather a lesson drawn from lived experience. Christianity certainly can succeed in other settings, even amid peace and prosperity, but it does become harder—perhaps as hard as passing through the eye of a needle.

A healthy distrust of worldly power and success is all the more necessary given the remarkable reversals of Christian fortunes over the ages, and the number of times that the faith seemed on the verge of destruction. In 500 Christianity was the religion of empire and domination; in 1000, it was the stubborn faith of exploited subject peoples, or barbarians on the irrelevant fringes of the great civilisations; in 1900, Christian powers ruled the world. Knowing what the situation will be in 2100 or 2500 would take a truly inspired prophet. But the one overarching lesson from this record of changing fortunes is that Christianity is never as weak as it appears, nor as strong as it appears. Whether we look backward or forward in history, we can see that time and again, Christianity demonstrates a breathtaking ability to transform weakness into strength. †

“My Realm is not of this world”

The message of the Gospel, the Word-sword of the Spirit, goes out from Christ's mouth and destroys His enemies by converting them, piercing them to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, judging the thoughts and intentions of their hearts. The Church has always recognized that God sent His only begotten Son in order to redeem the world, and that He will be satisfied with nothing less than what He paid for.

Christianity is anti-revolutionary. While Christians have always looked forward to the salvation of the world, believing that Christ died and rose again for that purpose, they have also seen the Kingdom's work as a leavening influence, gradually transforming the world into the image of God. The definitive cataclysm has *already taken place*, in the finished work of Christ. Jesus Christ established His mediatorial Kingdom by His death, resurrection, and ascension to the heavenly Throne, and as the Second Adam rules over all creation until the end of the world, when He shall come again to judge the living and the dead; He is conquering all nations by the Gospel, extending the fruits of His victory throughout the world, thereby fulfilling the dominion mandate originally given by God to Adam. Eventually, through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, “the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea” (Isa. 11:9)—thus the Biblical promises of abundant blessing, in every area of life, will be poured out by God upon the whole world, in covenantal response to the faithfulness of His people.

The orthodox Christian Church has been generally optimistic in her view of the power of the Gospel to convert the nations. When the early missionaries from the East first ventured into the demonized lands of our pagan forefathers, they had not the slightest intention of developing peaceful coexistence with warlocks and their terrorizing deities. When St. Boniface came up against Thor's sacred oak tree in his mission to the heathen Germans, he simply chopped it down and built a chapel out of the wood. Thousands of Thor-worshippers, seeing that their god had

failed to strike St. Boniface with lightning, converted to Christianity on the spot. As for St. Boniface, he was unruffled by the incident. He knew that there was only one true God of thunder—the Triune Jehovah.

There is nothing strange about this. The attitude of Hope, the expectation of victory, is an absolutely fundamental characteristic of Christianity. The advance of the Church through the ages is inexplicable apart from it—just as it is also inexplicable apart from the fact that the Hope is true, the fact that Jesus Christ has defeated the powers and shall reign “*from the River to the ends of the earth.*” W. G. T. Shedd wrote: “Apart from the power and promise of God, the preaching of such a religion as Christianity, to such a population as that of paganism, is the sheerest Quixotism. It crosses all the inclinations, and condemns all the pleasures of guilty man. The preaching of the Gospel finds its justification, its wisdom, and its triumph, only in the attitude and relation which the infinite and almighty God sustains to it. It is His religion, and therefore it must ultimately become a universal religion.”

The nations rage, but God laughs: He has already set up His King on His holy mountain, and all nations will be ruled by Him (Psalm 2). All power in heaven and earth has been given to Christ (Matt. 28:18); as Martin Luther sang, “He must win the battle.” As the Gospel progresses throughout the world it will win increasing victories, until all kingdoms become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever. We must not concede to the enemy even one square inch of ground in heaven or on earth. Christ and His army are riding forth, conquering and to conquer, and we through Him will inherit all things.

As St. John declared in his first epistle, Christ “appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8). In terms of this purpose, the Lord began “binding the strong man” during His earthly ministry; having successfully completed His mission, *He is now plundering Satan's house and carrying off his property.*

The kingdom of God is like leaven. The kingdom of God produces the fine quality bread which all men seek. Christianity is the yeast, and it has a leavening effect on pagan, satanic cultures around it. It permeates the whole of culture, causing it to rise. The symbolism should be obvious: Christianity makes life a joy for godly men, providing them with the very best. Men may not understand exactly how the leaven works—how the spiritual power of God's kingdom spreads throughout their culture and makes it rise—but they can see and taste its effects.

Leaven takes time to produce its product. It takes time for the leaven-laden dough to rise. Men can wait for the yeast to do its work. God gives man time for the working of His spiritual leaven. Christians work inside the cultural material available in any given culture, seeking to refine it, permeate it, and make it into something fine. They know they will be successful, just as yeast is eventually successful in the dough, if it is given sufficient time to do its work. This is what God implicitly promises us in the analogy of the leaven: enough time to accomplish our individual and collective assignments.

If we really push the analogy (pound it, even), we can point to the fact that dough is pounded down several times by the baker before the final baking, almost as God, through the agents of Satan and the hostility of the world, pounds His kingdom in history and kneads the yeast-filled dough of men's cultures. What a marvelous description of God's kingdom!

Nevertheless, the yeast does its marvelous work just so long as the fires of the oven are not lit prematurely. If the full heat of the oven is applied to the dough before the yeast has done its work, both the yeast and the dough perish in the flames. God waits to apply the final heat (2 Pet. 3:9-10). First, His yeast—His church—must do its work, in time and on earth. It may take several poundings, but the end result is guaranteed. God does not intend to burn His bread to a useless crisp by prematurely placing it in the oven. He is a better baker than that.

—DAVID CHILTON / GARY NORTH

A Trustworthy Name

“I will also leave in the midst of thee an afflicted and poor people, and they shall trust in the name of the Lord.” —Zephaniah 3:12

When true religion is ready to die out among the wealthy it finds a home among the poor of this world, rich in faith. The Lord has even now His faithful remnant. Am I one of them?

Perhaps it is because men are afflicted and poor that they learn to trust in the name of the Lord. He that has no money must try what he can do on trust. He whose own name is good for nothing in his

own esteem, acts wisely to rest in another name, even that best of names, the name of Jehovah. God will always have a trusting people, and these will be an afflicted and poor people. Little as the world thinks of them, their being left in the midst of a nation is the channel of untold blessings to it. Here we have the conserving salt which keeps in check the corruption which is in the world through lust.

Again the question comes home to each one of us: am I one of them? Am I afflicted by the sin within me and around me? Am I poor in spirit, poor spiritually in my own judgment? Do I trust in the Lord? That is the main business. Jesus reveals the name, the character, the person of God: am I trusting in Him? If so, I am left in this world for a purpose. Lord, help me to fulfill it.

—SPURGEON