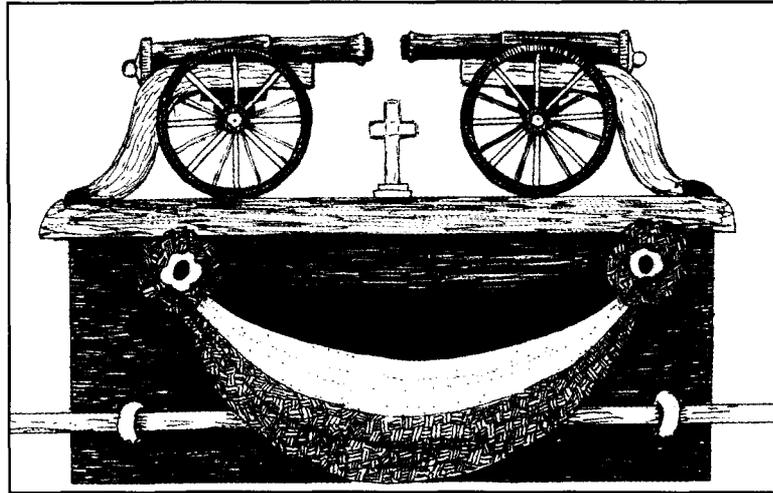


That New Time Religion

by Philip Jenkins



Americans in the 19th century had a confident pride that they would dominate the coming age, not only because of the immense economic power of the new nation, but as a natural outcome of its moral and religious strength. As Melville had written in *White Jacket*, “We Americans are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world. . . . The rest of the nations must soon be in our rear.” Millennial hopes grew during the 1890’s: The age to come would be “The American Century,” and also, inevitably, “The Christian Century.” In 1893, a World Parliament of Religions met in Chicago to celebrate the imminent global triumph not just of Christianity but of its liberal, Protestant, and quintessentially American form. The influential liberal magazine *The Christian Century* took its present optimistic title in 1901. Anyone who doubted the truth of this vision would be reassured by the vast achievements of Western, and particularly American, missionaries throughout Africa and Asia, and above all, among the huge population of China.

Looking back at the last hundred years, it would take a rare optimist to proclaim it a Christian century: From a Western standpoint, it has rather been an era of secularization, of steadily declining commitment to any supernatural system whatever. And yet those earlier visionaries may not have been as wrong as first appears. The 20th century was indeed characterized by an astonishing growth in the numbers and geographical spread of Christianity, which gained influence in Africa and Asia just as rapidly as it was losing ground in Europe and North America. Why, then, are we so blind to this historic achievement? Much of the answer seems to be that the religion currently burning its way across the globe is a traditional, enthusiastic kind of Chris-

tianity, spiritually dynamic yet politically conservative, and, for many reasons, this is anathema to Western elites. A West in spiritual decline confronts a wider world in the midst of religious revival, and neither understands nor likes what it sees.

The depth of the cultural schism was suggested last fall, when the world’s Anglican bishops held one of their periodic get-togethers at Lambeth. The gathering made the news in a quite uncharacteristic way, as a public well accustomed to hearing the familiar denunciations of apartheid and colonialism was taken aback to hear a forthrightly traditional statement about the evils of homosexuality and the impossibility of reconciling homosexual conduct with Christian ministry. Western liberal churchmen of most denominations had waited for decades to hear the authentic voice of the liberated Third World, that radical prophetic voice which would challenge Western imperialism, and now that they heard it, that voice violated the most basic liberal principles: It was in fact very, very conservative. The response to the statement on homosexuality can best be described as incomprehension mingled with sputtering rage, nowhere more so than in the words of the arch-liberal gadfly, Bishop John Spong of Newark. In a truly offensive statement, he declared that these mainly African bishops were basically a primitive bunch who have “moved out of animism into a very superstitious kind of Christianity” and, therefore, should not be taken too seriously. The whole tone of Third World spirituality appalled him, as did the “religious extremism” which dominated the Lambeth conference: “I never expected to see the Anglican Communion, which prides itself on the place of reason in faith, descend to this level of irrational Pentecostal hysteria.” His words recalled the bygone years in which black American spirituality was scornfully dismissed as simplistic holy rolling. The whole controversy over gays in the Church neatly illustrated the adage about being careful what you wish for, lest you get

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it: Be careful when you ask to hear the stark voice of the poor and oppressed; you may well not like what they have to say.

While the Lambeth affair made headlines and duly delighted Spong's numerous enemies, little attention was paid to the tectonic changes which it symbolized for the world's religious makeup in the new millennium. Westerners have long been fascinated by the impact of postmodern and feminist thought on their religious structures and have asked if, in the face of these challenges, Christianity can survive in any recognizable form. Despite these doubts, Christianity itself continues an amazing global boom, is situated to benefit from worldwide demographic trends, and promises to enjoy far greater influence in the future than it does today. Moreover, the shape of this emerging global religion is very much what Spong and his ilk would characterize as "irrational Pentecostal hysteria," and it is the postmodern and liberal trends which seem as endangered as the passenger pigeon. The world of the new century shows every sign of being a highly religious place, dominated by the great historic faiths: Christianity, of course, but also Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism.

Though the success or failure of a spiritual movement cannot be measured simply in terms of numbers, in this case the raw figures are startling. Today, six countries in the world have populations in excess of 200 million: In another century, there will be perhaps 14, and only one of these, the United States, will represent what we presently term the advanced Western world. China and India will continue to be the most populous states by far, with maybe a billion-and-a-half citizens in each, but rapid expansion will also occur in Latin American nations like Mexico and Brazil; Southeast Asian societies like Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines; and especially in Africa. By present projections, there could at that point be 500 million Nigerians.

Demographers are familiar enough with these projections, though virtually nobody has ever publicly explored their sweeping religious implications. Let us begin with what is now, and will continue to be, the largest religious structure on the planet, namely, the Roman Catholic Church. If we make the large assumption that the religious composition of these societies in another century will be roughly what it is today, then we already know that Euro-American Catholics will be a tiny minority in a Church overwhelmingly dominated by Latin Americans, Africans, and Asians, by Filipinos and Mexicans, Vietnamese and Congolese. It is all but certain that the 20th century is the last in which whites will dominate the Catholic Church. The situation becomes still more marked when we look at the "Western" societies themselves: By 2025, Hispanics and Asians combined will make up a quarter of the U.S. population, and a vastly greater proportion of American Catholics. To oversimplify, it is obvious to anyone with simple arithmetical skills that the Catholic future is brown and black.

Nor is this geographical shift solely a Catholic reality. Across Europe, the disposal of deserted churches of all denominations is a ubiquitous nightmare: Many become mosques. If present trends continue, Anglicanism could be the first of the colonial religions virtually to disappear in its imperial heartland, while it grows apace among the formerly colonized. As in the seventh century, Britain could be a rich mission field for Africa's muscular Christianity: Just when will the first dedicated missionaries begin their voyages from Lusaka to London?

Only by appreciating this historic shift in Christian numbers

can we understand what is so often dismissed as the diehard obscurantism of the Catholic hierarchy, and particularly that of Pope John Paul II, who knows all too well that the liberal issues dear to American or Dutch Catholics are irrelevant or worse to the socially traditional societies of the global South. The ordination of women to the priesthood may seem an essential point of justice to Westerners, but it is anathema to much of the emerging world. This is why Catholic leaders tend to yawn when Catholics in Boston or Munich threaten schism: It is the so-called traditionalists, not the liberals, who are already playing the game of the new century. Adapting to become "relevant" or sensitive to the needs of Western elites would be suicidal for the long-term prospects of the Church.

The "traditionalists" also know that no church or religion has a guaranteed market share, and the fact that Catholics today predominate in (say) the Philippines says nothing about the state of things in 50 or 100 years. Across the regions which will be the most populated in the new century, vast religious conflicts and contests are already in progress, though these impinge hardly at all on Western opinion-makers. In Latin America, the battle is between Catholics and Pentecostals, while Christians of several shades vie with Muslims for African souls: Those 500 million Nigerians are potential prizes for any of the great faiths, though currently Islam stands by far in the strongest position. Even in India, a land soon to surpass China in population, a staggering one-fifth of the population are Dalits, the so-called Untouchables, who represent a very fertile field for organized evangelism by any major faith with the will to reach them: Will that be Islam or Christianity?

Though it is likely that Christians will continue to outnumber Muslims for the foreseeable future, Muslims across the planet stand to benefit from exactly the same demographic trends which are producing the unimaginably rich harvest for Christians. Most notably, Muslims will thrive from the explosive growth of nations like Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Iran. Uncertain but intriguing are the prospects in vast but semi-closed countries like China, where, according to some estimates, there are already 40 or 50 million Christians, considerably more than in France or Great Britain, as well as tens of millions of Muslims. If religious restrictions were ever lifted in China, what would be the outcome of the contest? In numerical terms, China could easily become the world's largest Christian nation, the most populous Muslim nation, or both of these at once.

In short, the world is entering a state of intense religious competition which will determine the ideological and political map for centuries to come, a period of flux unparalleled since the medieval struggles which determined that European Christianity would survive the Turkish onslaught. And everywhere, the religions which are triumphing are unflinchingly traditional or even reactionary, preaching deep personal faith and communal orthodoxy, visionary charisma and clear scriptural authority, mysticism and puritanism. In this thought-world, prophecy and apocalypse are obvious everyday realities, while faith-healing and dream-visions are both integral to religious sensibility. Muslim, Catholic, or Pentecostal, these faiths are wholly uninterested in Western obsessions about gender and sexual orientation, or even liberation theology: The only liberation which matters is salvation. Still less do they mourn the death of God. Indeed, in the sense in which Dietrich Bonhoeffer used this notorious phrase, God is not only burningly alive across the planet, He promises to be ever more obviously and immediately so. But if this vision seems attractive or even intoxicating, we do

well to remember that many of these religious battles will be fought both between and within states, perhaps with the full panoply of weapons now available to even small nations: The true age of crusade and *jihad* might belong to the 21st century, not the 12th.

Considering these changes, we cannot fail to be struck by the sheer pervasive irrelevance of white Europeans and Americans, and their failure to appreciate what is going on around them: The Lambeth statement on homosexuality should have come as not the slightest surprise to anyone who had taken the trouble over the years to observe the moral rigor of African Christianity. Not only do Western Christians not see the struggles in progress around them, they are actually hostile to the missionary endeavors which represent a primary battlefield of the emerging world. Seeing only the idealized Hinduism offered by academics and romantic New Agers, they would, for instance, be appalled at any endeavor to evangelize the Dalit peoples oppressed for millennia by the Hindu caste system. And anyway, states the multicultural truism, who are we to export our tainted views to anyone? Far better to apologize repeatedly to the supposed victims of our past religious colonialism: the first nations in North America, the oppressed in Africa and Asia.

Thus confined to the sidelines of history, Westerners are going to find themselves increasingly out of touch with the religious dimensions which shape the new world and literally unable to communicate with the new people of faith. We can even imagine a frightening worst-case scenario of a world to come, in which an incredibly wealthy though numerically shrinking Western population espouses the values of humanism, ornamented with the vestiges of liberal Christianity and Ju-

daism; meanwhile, it confronts the poorer and vastly more numerous global masses who wave the flags not of red revolution, but of ascendant Christianity and Islam. Though this sounds not unlike the racial nightmares of the Cold War years, one crucial difference is that the have-nots will be inspired by the Scriptures and by the language of apocalypse rather than by the texts of Marx and Mao: We, the West, will be the final Babylon.

In January, Paul Lewis of the *New York Times* wrote an article entitled "As Nations Shed Roles, Is Medieval the Future?" which examined contemporary trends away from the powerful nation-state and suggested that a new world order might resemble the decentralized statelets and fiefs of the Middle Ages. Lewis interviewed pundits who speculated whether this neo-medieval world might be hooped together by a common ideology in the same way that Christianity had united the earlier period: Some identified democracy and the free market as the future universal creeds, others favored environmentalism as "a global cause that transcends national boundaries." Given the highly secular venue, it is not surprising that no expert suggested the obvious candidate for the new Christianity, which is, well, Christianity. It is quite possible to imagine a future Christendom not too different from the old, and we can only hope that the new *Res Publica Christiana* does not confront an equally militant Muslim world, *Dar al-Islam*, or else we really will have gone full circle back to the worst features of the 13th century. The difference from the old Christendom, with all its universal pretensions, is that the new model is unlikely to include the liberal and secular West. "Western Christianity" might yet become an oxymoron.

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Cedars and I

by John Nixon, Jr.

Cedars, though not of Lebanon, and I
(Nothing at all like Solomon) inhabit
My solitude. A temple, roofed with sky,

Contains our gnarled and shaggy presences—
Our evergreen if not as green as April
Insistence on survival. Hermit trees

And hermit, we at evening sometimes make
A little lonely hymn beneath the stars for
Whatever deities may be awake.