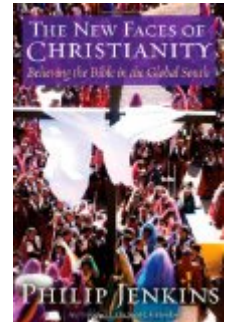


Philip Jenkins. *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. x + 252 pp. \$26.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-530065-9.



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Commissioned by Gene Mills (Florida State University)

A follow-up to his groundbreaking work in *The Next Christendom* (2002), Philip Jenkins's *The New Faces of Christianity* is in some ways like ploughing old ground with new tools, which is not intended as a backhanded compliment. In his new work, Jenkins contrasts between the different lenses through which the Bible is read in established churches of the North and the emerging churches of the South, exploring further themes already exposed in chapter 6 ("Coming to Terms") of *The Next Christendom*. The results are at times startling.

Central to his thesis is that the ancient worldview of the Bible has remarkable parallels to the current worldview of the global South. Asserting in chapter 2 ("Power in the Book") that the South tends to interpret the Bible conservatively, Jenkins divides his next five chapters into cultural themes (literacy, wealth, gender, politics, etc.) and contrasts how related biblical texts are read differently between Northern (or Western) theologians and their Southern (and Eastern) counterparts. Grinding poverty, pestilence, chronic war

and famine, forced migration, oppressive governments, and sporadic persecution; in short, what amounts to an apocalyptic vision to Northern Christians (e.g., the *Left Behind* series) are all too common realities for Southern believers. Precisely because the Bible was originally written to peoples for whom these too were a daily reality, the global South, so Jenkins argues, may in fact be in a better position to understand its message than those in the relatively posh and conflict-free North. (Jenkins reminds readers here that the West is not so far removed from such calamities either historically [e.g., the influenza epidemic following World War I] or physically [e.g., Hurricane Katrina or 9/11]). Because the biblical situation is nearer to the Southern situation, the Bible becomes a superlatively relevant book for their present.

Furthermore, biblical accounts of miracles and a worldview infused with demonic spirits, nearly unfathomable to the post-Enlightened West, has far more currency in these more "primitive" societies. Jenkins is quick to point out that

the two styles of reading the Bible are not necessarily exclusive. There are after all feminist voices in Africa and fundamentalist ones in America. The trend, however, is for the South to read the Bible more conservatively than Northern liberals would like. Jenkins's approach throughout the five thematic chapters is to present a passage from scripture and contrast how it is understood between Northern and Southern perspectives. The exercise is often eye-opening. Numerous texts from both testaments are cited and interpreted by adherents from a variety of backgrounds, providing the work with a rich texture of views. Though Jenkins switches between texts and their interpretations in a manner that is not always clear and does not consistently provide a perspective from the North, this is only a minor nuisance to a presentation that is both engaging in style and illuminating in content.

In the end, Jenkins asks us crucially what an "authentic" reading of scripture should be (p. 191). As belief in the supernatural has been exorcised from the consciousness of the West, has the global South retrieved a worldview much closer to the Bible? Is African Christianity now an authentic reflection of the biblical text as written to first-century believers, the way all Christians should read the Bible? Quoting from C. S. Lewis, Jenkins wants a Christianity that accommodates both a "thick" (experiential) and "clear" (philosophical) reading of scripture (p. 2). Drawing at the outset from Harry Emerson Fosdick's 1921 sermon, Jenkins asks, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" (p. 2). His inclusive answer at the end is reminiscent of Fosdick's plea for a tolerant church that can embrace both liberal and conservative voices. It is doubtful, however, that the global church will be as accommodating, at least not in the immediate future. Whether this bodes ill or well for the future of the church is not Jenkins's objective. What fascinates him and the reader is the surprising ways in which familiar biblical stories are understood in Majority World contexts, challenging Northerners to see sacred writ

through "new eyes." Jenkins applies his observations more critically in the final chapter, where he makes final contrasts between "North and South," providing a satisfying conclusion to the whole.

However, the individual chapters do suffer from too much blurring of the cultures. Jenkins relies on a wide sampling from various countries without much consideration as to how the reading impacts the local context. Quite divergent cultures, such as Korea and Malawi, are analyzed in the same context, which has the deceptive effect of leading the reader to conclude that these cultures share much more similarity than they actually do. One would wish to see how the Bible is read in a particular culture. The question as to whether or not the reading of the text changes culture is never adequately explored. The field that Jenkins ploughs (the world) is too broad to unearth much by way of in-depth analysis. Also, one questions the utility of the term "global South" when so many of the examples come from Asia and the East; which is all the more ironic since Jenkins is aware of this problem in *The Next Christendom* (p. 72). Perhaps "Majority World" (which Jenkins also applies) should be used more consistently. Despite these shortcomings, *The New Faces of Christianity* is a worthy companion to his earlier work in that it illustrates how dramatically global Christianity is changing and the far-reaching implications this has on hermeneutics and practical faith. By sheer size, the new faces may very well become the norm of Christian expression, if they are not so already.

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