

Christianity Tomorrow

Father John McCloskey

Philip Jenkins is a distinguished professor at Penn State University and perhaps the foremost historian of religious trends today. With one book after another, he has treated with objectivity and unique insights topics as varied as pedophilia and priests, biblical scholarship, child pornography and terrorism.

Although he is a historian, his expertise in the use of statistics also gives him credentials as a sociologist. Consequently, the media often call on him for commentary on controversial subjects.

In the last several years Jenkins has published two notable books, *The New Anti-Catholicism: The Last Acceptable Prejudice*, in 2003, and *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, in 2002, both from Oxford University Press.

In the second book he tackles the most intriguing subject of all: Where is Christianity headed in the next 50 years?

He speaks in demographic and geographical terms, although he most certainly takes into account the question of what brand of Christianity will grow. He uses the terms liberal and conservative rather than orthodox and heterodox, but the meaning is clear for the discerning reader. Jenkins, himself a former Catholic turned Episcopalian, does not signal his current religious posture but maintains a cool objectivity as the historian he is. The book won several mentions as one of the top religious books of the year.

Jenkins gives a short history of anti-Catholicism in the United States. He tells of the 19th-century bigotry stemming from the overwhelmingly Protestant culture that was aimed at the millions of emigrant Catholics who came from Ireland, Italy and southern Germany.

This attitude stemmed from the prejudices dating from the Protestant Reformation and was transmitted to the United States by earlier migrations of dissenting English Protestants and most notably the Scotch-Irish, who were Calvinists. They perpetuated the famous "black legends," such as the Crusades, the Inquisition and the persecution of Jews, brought up to date in recent days with the controversy regarding Pope Pius XII's role in the Holocaust.

Rarely, however, did these prejudices result in violence; rather, they were reflected in general Protestant-oriented teaching in public schools and in a lack of economic and political opportunity for new Catholic emigrants.

With the election of John F. Kennedy to the presidency and the growing societal power of lay Catholics in all sectors of society, it was thought that some of these prejudices were about to disappear. However, as Jenkins points out, the leading anti-Catholics today in the United States are "anti-Catholic Catholics," or so-called liberal Catholics who have internalized the world's contempt.

The reaction to Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* took place after the publication of the Jenkins book but surely would merit a chapter in a second edition. Ironically, those who used to be the most suspicious and even bigoted, the evangelical Christians, are gradually becoming faithful Catholics' best allies in the cultural wars taking place in the United States.

Now, anti-Catholicism will never disappear, whether in the United States or elsewhere. After all, the faith, like the cross, is a sign of contradiction. *The New Anti-Catholicism* does an excellent job, however, in showing its roots, history and current state in the United States.

Jenkins and sociologist Rodney Stark of Baylor University (see Aceprensa reviews) are two pre-eminent American researchers on religious themes and are widely recognized as such by the American media.

They show in their many books the beneficial effects of orthodox Christianity on civilization and culture through the centuries while patiently analyzing the many misunderstandings, myths and plain lies its enemies allege against it.

The Church continues to grow, and as such, it will always be subject to attack by those who hate it. It is encouraging to have two such renowned researcher scholars make the case scientifically for the great good the Church has done and continues to do for the human race.

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Jenkins tells us: "We are currently living through one of the 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 Europe and European-derived civilizations overseas, above all in North America. ..."

"The stereotype holds that Christians are un-black, un-poor and un-young. If that is true, then the growing secularization of the West can only mean that Christianity is in its dying days. Globally, the faith of the future must be Islam. Over the past century, however, the center of gravity in the Christian world has shifted inexorably southward, to Africa, Asia and Latin America."

It is astonishing how few serious Christians connect their present efforts of evangelization in terms of where they would like the faith to be in the future. Many in the West simply bemoan the sad decline of religious Catholic practice and fight a rear guard action to salvage what is left of Christian culture in their own countries or continents.

Other faithful living in what are referred to euphemistically as "developing countries" are simply content, and rightfully so, to survive the economic and societal misery in which they live and look forward more to the rewards in the next life rather than worrying about Christian growth or impact in the next several decades. Indeed, in Asia, Africa or Latin America, many are literally suffering or dying for their Christian beliefs while many in the decadent West are lightly throwing away centuries of their Christian heritage.

Jenkins goes into great detail explaining that Christianity of the Southern Hemisphere is

above all traditional, whether it is of the Catholic or Protestant variety.

He also points out the existence of hundreds of millions of Pentecostal Christians and independent churches, of whom he says, "These new churches preach deep personal faith and communal orthodoxy, mysticism and Puritanism, all founded on clear scriptural authority. ..."

To these, he writes, "prophecy is an everyday reality, while faith healing, exorcism and dream-visions are all basic components of religious sensibility. ... According to current projections, the numbers of Pentecostal believers should surpass the 1 billion mark before 2050."

Both of these developments have enormous consequences for where the Catholic Church places its resources for evangelization in the decades ahead, in terms of new dioceses, utilization of priests and religious, and the new ecclesial movements and institutions. Surely it is not a question of abandoning the declining continents of Europe and North America. They can recover even though the demographics argue against it, particularly in Europe.

The West still maintains great economic and cultural power in the new world of globalization. In the waning years of the awe-inspiring pontificate of Pope John Paul II, we can see what enormous challenges face his immediate successors, who well may come from the ranks of African or South American cardinals, in just keeping pace with the growing number of "Southern" Christians.

Every Christian with apostolic desires and historical insight who rejoices that indeed the

Gospel is being preached even to the ends of the earth should read *The Next Christendom*. At the same time, every Catholic longs for unity. When primitive Christianity is so alive, particularly in Africa, it is time for the hierarchical and sacramental Church to preach the truth enthusiastically to those newly evangelized Pentecostals and independent churches.

In Central and South America, with centuries of Catholic culture and tradition, the solution is re-evangelization to win back the millions who have fallen into Protestant sects, due, above all, to lack of catechesis and native clergy.

According to Jenkins, Christianity will continue to be the largest world religion for decades to come with explosive growth, but we must ask ourselves, will it be Catholic? The answer will come from the Holy Spirit and from those who collaborate with Him. Who knows, perhaps in a century or two or less, we will be sending missionaries to New York, Los Angeles, London, Paris and Moscow, or even to Rome!

The Longest Prejudice

In *The New Anti-Catholicism*, Jenkins deals with anti-Catholicism, perhaps the longest prejudice in the history of the United States, particularly topical when a professed Catholic ran for president while holding views antithetical to Catholic moral teachings on issues regarding marriage, family and life while his opponent, an evangelical Christian, held to Catholic beliefs in these same areas. Jenkins starts off his book with the famous quote of a social critic of several decades ago, Peter Vierick, who said, "Catholic baiting is the anti-Semitism of the liberals."