

The Last and Next Christendom: Implications for Interpreting the Bible

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The thesis of this essay is that world Christianity is exploding so dramatically that biblical interpretation needs to make sure it is keeping pace, without sacrificing either the essential content of the biblical message or the intellectual rigour of scholarly interpretation. I will be making the following points.

1. World Christianity is changing rapidly, with implications for how biblical interpretation in centres of learning and training ought to proceed.
2. The culturally dominant mode of academic interpretation worldwide, which for convenience we will term the 'historical critical method',¹ has despite its contributions consistently failed to interpret the Bible in a sufficiently Christian way for over two centuries now.
3. Biblical interpretation of the 21st century must be careful to respond to the demands of a growing church without capitulating to mere local fervour and pragmatism. At the same time it must strive to escape its Babylonian captivity to scholarly trends that too facily reject the core of the Christian message.

The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity

The heading of this section is the title of Philip Jenkins' important recent book²

¹ For a concise characterisation see Richard N. Soulen and R. Kendall Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 78. For critical analysis see, amidst a vast literature, Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove/Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1996), esp. 221ff.

² Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

(parenthetical page numbers in the text below refer to this work). In it he documents convincingly the Copernican shift that Christianity has undergone in the last century. While European and what Jenkins calls 'Northern' Christianity has for the most part been decreasing in numbers and strength, 'Southern' Christianity has seen spectacular growth.³ The new arrivals in the church are largely people of colour and in poverty, which also describes the majority of the world population. Kenneth L. Woodward wrote in *Newsweek* two years ago that Christianity is spreading more rapidly now than at any time or place since the NT era.⁴ He points out that in many of the lands where this is happening, conversion requires 'enormous courage' because of social rejection and often outright persecution.⁵ And the engine fuelling this powerful emergence is a Bible-believing, literal hermeneutic. What is being preached and believed is not the social or political or 'critical' religion that has taken over many Western churches who no longer believe in things like Jesus' divinity or his virginal conception or blood atonement or bodily resurrection or the authority of the Bible as God's inspired Word. As Jenkins writes, 'the dominant current in emerging world Christianity is traditionalist, orthodox, and supernatural' (8; cf. 217–20).

Here are some indicators of the growth to which Jenkins refers. The number of Christians in Africa has gone from 10 million in 1900 to 360 million in 2000 (4).⁶ Two-thirds of all Protestants in the world live outside North America and Europe. There are 20 million baptised Anglicans in Nigeria alone (59). There are only 2.8 in the USA, where the number of Episcopalians has been spiralling downward for decades.⁷ England claims 25 million Anglicans (94), but fewer than one million ever attend church even at Christmas or Easter (87); most have no practical tie with the church at all. (By contrast, 70% of Christians in the Philippines regularly attend church.⁸) In fact Great Britain has become a mission field; 'it plays host to some 1,500 missionaries from fifty nations' (205). While Lutherans declined in numbers in the US 1980–2000, they grew in many countries of South America, Africa, and Asia, in some places at the rate of over 250%.⁹ People are responding to the message of salvation in Christ all over the world. In Jenkins' words, 'Amazing as it may appear to a blasé West, Christianity exercises an overwhelming global appeal, which shows not the slightest sign of waning' (39).

³ See also Dana L. Robert, 'Shifting Southward', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 24/2 (2000) 50–58; G.C. Waldrep, 'The Expansion of Christianity: An Interview with Andrew Walls', *Christian Century* August 2–9, 2000, 792–95.

⁴ Kenneth L. Woodward, 'The Changing Face of the Church', *Newsweek*, April 16, 2001, 48.

⁵ Ibid. 50.

⁶ Cf. Tite Tiénou, 'The State of the Gospel in Africa', *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (April 2001) 154–56, 161–62.

⁷ Cf. Peter Brierley and Heather Wraight, *Atlas of World Christianity* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 16. See also R. William Franklin, 'Lambeth 1998 and the Future Mission of the Episcopal Church', *Anglican Theological Review* 81/2 (1999), 261–69; Robert, 'Shifting Southward,' 53.

⁸ Woodward, 'The Changing Face of the Church,' 48.

⁹ Brierley and Wraight, *Atlas of World Christianity*, 20.

Now we must be cautious about this growth. Jenkins defines 'Christian' as anyone who calls himself one and who affirms that Jesus 'is not merely a prophet or an exalted moral teacher, but in some unique sense the Son of God, and the Messiah' (88). This is classification that undoubtedly includes many whose complete system of belief and practice may not be very recognisably Christian. In this schema, for example, Mormons are Christians (66, 86, 104). Yet Jenkins does not take the most wildly optimistic projections of Christian numbers (223–24, notes 2 and 3). In the end he arrives at a fairly conservative assessment of current church memberships, their rate of growth, and their likely sizes over the next half century or so. Of course there is sure to be unforeseen change, and some of what Jenkins predicts will turn out different than he visualises. Jenkins admits as much (e.g., 80–81; cf. 13–14, 89). He is, however, likely to be more right than wrong.

Some more statistics will underscore the change that is underway. Already in the 1960s, Christians came to outnumber Muslims in Africa (56).¹⁰ As historian Adrian Hastings puts it, 'Black Africa today is totally inconceivable apart from the presence of Christianity' (quoted in Jenkins, 56).¹¹ The most recent calculated rate of growth was about 23,000 new Christians every day (56). While liberal Western thought had expected that the end of colonial domination would mean an Africa returning to indigenous religion, or embracing Marxism or Western secularism, what has happened is a return to something resembling apostolic Christian faith and practice. Today Uganda is 35–40% Anglican (60) and 35% Catholic (91) for a total of 75% Christian population; Nigeria is 40% Christian (89); Botswana is 50% Christian (69). Overall, the Christian presence in Africa may be placed at about 46% of the total population (56).

In Asia, there are nearly twice as many Presbyterians in South Korea as in the USA (71) or perhaps even four times as many.¹² In Communist Vietnam, 9% of the population is listed as Christian. This is sure to be too low because it only counts officially registered churches; for instance, the province of Lao Cai, is not counted. The Christian population there went from zero in 1991 to perhaps 60,000 by 1998 (71). If we take a conservative estimate of 50 million as the number of Christians in China, that means there are more practising Christians there than in either France or Britain (70). The US State Department estimates there are 100 million Christians in China; while this may be inflated, if it were correct then 8% of the total population is Christian, the same percentage as Buddhists in that nation.

¹⁰ For an assessment of the broader Arab world see Tarek Mitri, 'Who are the Christians of the Arab World?' *International Review of Mission* 89 (2000) 12–27.

¹¹ For historical perspective see Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa 1450–1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa: From Africa to the Present* (Grand Rapids/Lawrenceville, N.J.: Eerdmans/Africa World Press, 1995); Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Stead, *A History of the Church in Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

¹² The figure given in Woodward, 'The Changing Face of the Church', 48.

All over the world Pentecostal numbers are increasing at the rate of around 19 million each year (63). The largest Pentecostal denomination in the US, the Assemblies of God, has 2–3 million members. This is dwarfed by that group's 12 million members in Brazil alone (64).

Meanwhile, twenty years ago we were told that West Germany was about 45% Protestant and 45% Roman Catholic. Today in unified Germany, only one-third is Protestant in any sense, and fewer than 1 million 'demonstrate any regular religious participation' (95). That is less than 2% of the overall population. Roman Catholic participation is not much higher. Meanwhile, 25% of Germans 'claim no religious affiliation, not even a residual Christianity' (95). This 'Christian' nation has obviously moved dramatically in the direction of non-Christian conviction.

The picture is clear and to many will be startling. The Christianity of Europe and North America is waning in comparison to its robust growth in developing nations. Overall, populations in developing nations are also climbing, whereas they are stagnant or in decline in many parts of Europe. Only God knows the future, but to the extent that we can plot trends, 'Southern' Christianity appears poised to continue to expand rapidly, while 'Northern' Christianity (particularly in the secularised or 'liberal' forms favoured by most intellectuals) will continue to shrivel, at least in numbers and quite possibly in influence. All this amounts to a new climate, a new culture, for interpreting the Bible today.

The Decaying Dominance of Western Academic Interpretation of Scripture

Lamin Sanneh, Professor of History at Yale, points out the irony that theological education goes on today in the West 'largely uninterested in Christianity's unprecedented expansion around the world'.¹³ He adds: 'Standard theological sources and methods have failed to show any awareness of the Copernican shift that has taken place in the religious map of the world.'¹⁴ And he comments:

Christianity has become a genuinely multicultural world religion, thriving profusely in the idioms of other languages and cultures, marked by a lively cross-cultural and interreligious sensibility, unburdened by the heavy artillery of doctors and councils, and otherwise undaunted by the scandalous paucity of money, trained leadership, infrastructure, and resources. Nothing better demonstrates the newness of world Christianity than the fact that has ceased, or is ceasing, to be weighed down by its missionary past.¹⁵

¹³ 'Global Christianity and the Re-education of the West,' *Christian Century* July 19–26, 1995, 715.

¹⁴ *Ibid* 716.

¹⁵ *Ibid* 717.

Meanwhile, dominant academic institutions of the West continue to teach the same methods and principles for Bible interpretation that have contributed substantially to the widespread abandonment of Christian belief in 'Northern' Christianity. A recent book on the history of NT interpretation illustrates this. *William Baird's History of New Testament Research*, volume two: *From Jonathan Edwards to Rudolf Bultmann*¹⁶ devotes by far the bulk of its attention to movements like rationalism, the Tübingen school, liberalism, and the history of religion school. Each of these movements jettisoned key elements of historic Christianity in the interest of current trends in thought and in that sense abandoned the Christian faith (despite the frequent insistence that they were simply making it palatable for a new generation). The result is that many university-trained pastors, and most of their professors in large domains of academe, came to deny the Christian faith as confessed in the creeds down through church history – and as professed by the 'Southern' churches of the new millennium.

Now in the context of a Western and particularly Hungarian university, an august institution of higher learning with a rich and noble scholarly heritage, none should deny the inherent importance of academic study in the highest sense. It is right that biblical interpretation in the church be informed by disciplines like Greek and Hebrew language, biblical studies, church history, systematic and historical theology, and so on as its ministers are trained in the knowledge and skills passed along by their learned professors. At the same time, it has become clear that there is an ecclesia of academia with its own dogmas. It is not only the traditional church that has passed along certain doctrines uncritically.

For example, the rationalism of Lessing¹⁷ had huge unprovable assumptions that make sense in a Kantian philosophical framework but are not self-evident in most cultures around the world today. Lessing confessed scepticism toward facts of history. While of course mere historical facts are not God, Christians today need not feel the same compulsion to genuflect to his prejudice against them as they witness to the plausibility and indeed truth of the Christian message. The methodological agnosticism of Ernst Troeltsch¹⁸ has served respectable historiographical aims, but Western universities have too facily taken its informing premises on faith. For instance, while it is generally true that we should suspect singular events of the past, there is nothing

¹⁶ Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002.

¹⁷ See Henry Chadwick, *Lessing's Theological Writings* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957).

¹⁸ Troeltsch wrote prolifically, but his outlook is conveniently summarised in his essays 'Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology', in Gregory W. Dawes, ed., *The Historical Jesus Quest: Landmarks in the Quest for the Jesus of History* (Louisville/Leiderdrop: Westminster John Knox/Deo, 1999), 29–53; 'The dogmatics of the 'Religionsgeschichtliche Schule', *American Journal of Theology* 17 (1913) 1–21; and 'Historiography', in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings, vol. 6 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922), 716–23. For a useful response to Troeltschian criticism, see Alvin Plantinga. 'Two (or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship', *Modern Theology* 14/2 (1998) 243–78.

Troeltsch says that proves that Jesus might not have come to earth from God and risen from the dead following his crucifixion for the sins of all who believe on his name. He just rules it out by methodological decree drawing on warrants ubiquitous in the German university climate of his age.¹⁹

German scholar Gerhard Maier is one of many who came to see through the pretence of what Adolf Schlatter called 'atheistische Methoden in der Theologie':

I had my first formative experience in the encounter with critical theological hermeneutics when I switched to theological studies after completing training in the field of law. At that time practically everyone in German theology was speaking of the 'significance' of this or that biblical account. At the same time the 'facticity' of those accounts was widely denied. As a lawyer I had learned that the facts must be ascertained before their significance can be assessed. In German Protestant theology the procedure was precisely the reverse. But is such spiritualizing legitimate? Can the historicity of the Christian message be placed in question and its authority and significance still upheld? ²⁰

A second far-reaching experience was the transition from pastoral work to academic theological instruction. As a pastor, in entirely normal circumstances with neither charismatic nor other unusual factors at work, I had preached and prayed, shared people's awakening to faith, observed the effectiveness of God's Word, and learned increasingly to trust that Word. The 'critical' vantage point of theology in the 60s and 70s, however, stood diametrically opposed to this burgeoning trust. Now, which basic posture was correct? Trust or doubt? Confidence or scepticism?

Striking connections and confirmations of the biblical reports became evident in that moment when I honestly and openly wrestled with the possibility that the biblical Word – even with respect to historical events – could be true. This was not the world of legends, of contrivances, of fictions. Rather I detected here 'the scent of truth', as Wolfgang Schadewaldt once put it. I therefore opted for a basic posture of trust, of remaining open to the possibility that the biblical reports are reliable. All my subsequent work followed from this basic posture.

Maier concludes with these provocative words:

I would like to pose this question to those who prefer a different position: How can we remain Christians when we call biblical revelation in doubt? How is God's voice supposed to remain perceptible when we subject everything to the violent constraints of explanation based on the purely immanent?²¹

¹⁹ Rightly noted by William J. Abraham, 'Revelation Reaffirmed', in *Divine Revelation*, ed. Paul Avis (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1997), 204.

²⁰ Gerhard Maier, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, trans. R. Yarbrough (Wheaton: Crossway, 1994), xi–xii. For a translation of Schlatter's original essay see Werner Neuer, *Adolf Schlatter*, trans. R. Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 211–25.

²¹ Maier, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, xii, 'Explanation based on the purely immanent' summarises the hermeneutic of much academic interpretation of the Bible in the wake of the Enlightenment and in many university circles around the world today.

These questions are being asked increasingly within academic circles at present.²² They are also thrust upon us by the growth of a world church whose leaders require grounding in Christian knowledge, faith, and practice, not in the discredited scepticism of a continent and culture whose leaders have too frequently rejected the truth of the religion that many people in their churches still cling to – a religion that in many quarters, though with as yet unforeseeable results, is sweeping the globe.

The Challenge for Reading and Proclaiming the Bible Today

It should be underscored that to affirm this is not to call for end to scholarly interpretation of Scripture, but for its renewal. Sanneh points out that by waking up to world trends:

Biblical studies could receive an infusion of new research tasks; and only through mission studies are Western biblical scholars and theologians likely to learn the work done in their own fields by their African, Asian, and Latin American colleagues.²³

Biblical interpreters of the 21st century who have any sense of call to serve the church of Jesus Christ must be careful to respond to the demands of a growing church without capitulating to mere local fervour and pragmatism. The dangers of apocalyptic or prophetic enthusiasm are real in many new churches. No age or locale is free from the lure of overwrought or even heretical Christian expression. Tiénou warns, for example, that 'an African Christianity that is wholly exotic is a betrayal of the gospel'.²⁴ Academic interpretation of the Bible (meaning, among other things, interpretation that is not ruled by current dogmatic convictions, whether 'liberal' or 'conservative' or 'Pentecostal' or something else) is absolutely necessary for the church to understand, live out, and proclaim its doctrine to this generation and to future ones. Rigorous study in itself is not wrong, as theological scholars through the centuries abundantly illustrate. It must be informed, however, by premises that are not *a priori* exclusive of Christian truth claims.

In other words, throughout the world there is an acute need for church leaders with knowledge of original languages and scholarly competencies for verifying the original texts of Scripture, their best translation, and their meaning, and their application. Pastoral leaders need grounding in the history of Israel and OT Scripture and theology, Second Temple Judaism, the first century and its history and literatures, the NT Scriptures and their theology, the patristic era, and subsequent periods, debates, issues in the

²² Cf. Kwame Bediako, 'Africa and Christianity on the Threshold of the Third Millennium', *African Affairs*, 99, (2000) 303.

²³ 'Global Christianity and the re-education of the West', 717.

²⁴ 'The State of the Gospel in Africa', 161.

history of Christian faith – and secular conviction as well. Everywhere there is need for broad and deep understanding of world religions. Moreover, we need a grasp of the contemporary trends that are fuelling the critical theory that is dominant in the university setting and influential across the whole world of discourse in the world of science and government and education and commerce and the arts.²⁵ Christian faith throughout its history has typically (though not always) sparked interest in the world God has made, not just in spiritual matters. Modern science arose in part precisely because of biblical convictions about God and the world and their connection. The increase of world Christianity should result in an increase in literacy and learning, precisely because Christians come to faith by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God (cf. Rom. 10:17), and that implies reading and analysis and synthesis, all activities calling for intelligence and reason and scholarship.

At the same time the West and the 'North' can learn from the 'South' that it is time to escape our Babylonian captivity to scholarly trends that too facily reject the core of the Christian message. Christ is our Lord, not the composite beliefs of university structures with no room for the sovereignty of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment belief in reason and the human spirit has helped give us technology, but it also gave us the bloodiest century of human history, with the carnage hardly abating thus far as a new century has got started. It is time for Christians, whether pastors or professors, to listen to the Bible as God's Word again even in the university. Our brothers and sisters in the faith, and those whom we are called to identify with and reach out to and learn from, are the people of colour and poverty who are now the majority in the world church, not just other Hungarians or Europeans or North Americans who look like us and identify with our particular Christian heritage.

In other words, to return to the title of this article, a lesson to be drawn from 'The Last and Next Christendom' is that Christian belief worldwide is no longer a projection of whatever is dominant for academic theologians or biblical studies specialists at Berlin, Oxford, the Sorbonne, and Harvard. Christian renewal around the world is reminding even sceptical Western observers that it actually never was. Since Christianity 'has become the most global of all religions',²⁶ academic discourse centred around it must rise above its parochial and still-lingering past. Today, for Christians who care to fear God, to love the gospel, and to live in the broadest possible community with fellow believers, new possibilities abound for biblical understanding and ministry, as well as new opportunities for labouring together as the church strives continually to glorify God under Christ's lordship around the globe.

²⁵ An example of this ongoing project is D.A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Grand Rapids/Leicester: Zondervan/Inter-Varsity Press, 1996).

²⁶ Bediako, 'Africa and Christianity on the Threshold of the Third Millennium', 307. Yet Robert states, 'What at first glance appears to be the largest world religion is in fact the ultimate local religion' ('Shifting Southward', 56). Both statements have their validity, illustrating the complexity of understanding the character of world Christianity at present.