

Gospel and Cultures  
October 26, 2006  
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Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing in the Bible in the Global South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006)

In his latest book, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing in the Bible in the Global South*, Philip Jenkins explores ways in which the Bible is being read and understood within the growing church of the southern hemisphere. Jenkins begins from a similar starting point to the authors of *Converging on Culture* (edited by Brown, Devaney and Tanner) in recognizing the perspectival character of modern theology done by the global north and often assumed to be universal: “We will no longer treat the culture-specific interpretations of North Americans and Europeans as ‘theology’—that is, as the real thing—while the rest of the world produces its curious provincial variants of ‘African theology,’ ‘Asian theology’ and so on” (2). Jenkins alerts his readers to a reality documented in his previous book, *The Next Christendom*: Christianity is increasingly a southern phenomenon, and regions once seen as peripheral to theology are in fact becoming the church’s demographic centers. He goes on to trace some of the unique ways in which African, Asian and Latin American Christians in diverse cultural contexts read the Bible—including those that northern liberals find challenging and uncomfortable.

Jenkins focuses his study on Africa and Asia, though he does deal with Latin America to some extent as well. He draws not just from the written work of scholars from the southern hemisphere, but also extensively from popular and grass-roots sources, such as sermons and discussions among lay people (8). Jenkins recognizes that what he calls the “Global South” is a complex and diverse set of cultures, just as is the Global North (15). Nonetheless, he is able to discern some striking trends in the Bible’s use.

The overarching trend in biblical interpretation in the southern churches is a tendency toward a more literal approach (4-5). This is in part due to the fact that the communities doing the interpretation share greater affinities with the social and economic realities portrayed by the Bible than many in the Global North (5). Jenkins notes, “Cultures that readily identify with biblical worldviews find it easier to read the Bible not just as historical fact, but as relevant instruction for daily conduct...” (6). The Bible is afforded a level of authority typically not found in northern liberal churches: “To quote a recent study of the AICs[African Independent Churches], ‘For the African Christians, the Bible has come to take the place of the traditional ancestor whose authority cannot be disputed’” (35).

Jenkins traces how the realities of poverty and life in an agricultural economy link biblical cultures and cultures of the southern churches, lending powerful resonance to metaphors about sowing seed, or the scarcity of bread and water (70-71). Moreover, political unrest, upheaval and exile in many southern countries today parallel the experiences of Israel and first-century Palestine in immediate ways (82). Persecution and martyrdom for Christian faith are not foreign concepts to many Christians in the Global South (128). One provocative example Jenkins draws out is how the Dalits (Untouchables) in India read the gospel stories about Jesus crossing purity boundaries (136).

Jenkins notes how popular the Old Testament is in Africa, alongside two New Testament books often underemphasized in the northern churches—James and Hebrews. Due to resonances with indigenous African cultures, the sections of the Old Testament that deal with sacrificial traditions and the law are often given more prominence than in the modern North (54-55). The themes of community righteousness, the collective impact of personal sin and spiritual leadership in national life are often featured in sermons and biblical interpretation in Africa (62-63).

Cultures within the southern churches often bring to the Bible a worldview that aligns more closely with that of the biblical writers than a modern western one. For instance, prophecy and dreams are often given strong credibility (57). Spiritual warfare and the integral relationship between spiritual, economic and physical health and freedom are assumed to be realities (106-23). The Bible's descriptions of angels, demons and spirits strike a chord with Christians who have converted from animist backgrounds (98-101).

What does all this mean for an increasingly interlinked global church? Jenkins and some of the southern church leaders he cites suggest a kind of hermeneutical advantage for those in Africa, Asia and Latin America in approaching the Bible. As Musimbi Kanyaro says, "Those cultures which are far removed from biblical culture risk reading the Bible as fiction" (68). The many affinities between cultures of the Global South and biblical cultures give southern Christians a cultural proximity to the biblical text that northerners lack. Jenkins writes, "[W]e can reasonably ask whether the emerging Christian traditions of the Two-Thirds World have recaptured themes and trends in Christianity that the older churches have forgotten, and if so, what we can learn from their insights" (178). The churches of the Global South may help the North see how beholden it is to the idea of secular progress, for instance (156).

In tracing the current controversies over sexual ethics in the Anglican Communion, Jenkins points out how culturally-conditioned northern theological approaches are, even when they purport to be universal narratives of liberation and inclusion. Given how interlinked South and North are becoming through immigration, technology and the global economy, the phenomenon Jenkins describes offers the promise of a fresh encounter of gospel and culture across global boundaries that has the potential to challenge, enrich and illuminate Christians everywhere.