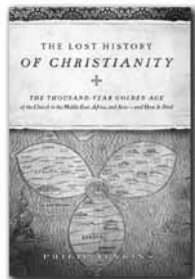


Book Reviews

The Lost History of Christianity, by Philip Jenkins
(Harper One, 2008)

—reviewed by Fred Lewis



There is a lot of talk in missionary circles about how to establish new churches. There's some talk about the persecution of Christians. And post 9/11 there's a little talk about the disappearance of Christianity in Asia and Africa after the Muslim conquests in the 600s. But until I read the following quote from *The Lost History of Christianity* by Philip Jenkins (Harper One, 2008), I had never once thought about a *theology* of the extinction of a form of Christianity: "Besides the missionary theology cultivated by many churches, we also need a theology of extinction" (Jenkins, 249).

Many well-deserved, positive reviews of Jenkins' book were written soon after it was published. Jenkins indeed does a good job of re-telling the story of the initial expansion and near extinction of distinct forms of Christianity (i.e., 'Christianities') in Africa and Asia up to about 1400, C.E. It's an interesting and sobering story, containing many implications for missions in general.

Given that *IJFM* is published in order to facilitate frontier missiology, I started to reflect on the causes of the deaths of different Christianities as a way of drawing insights or lessons for practitioners of frontier missions. Although learning about what may lead to the death of a Christianity is not quite the same as focusing on what promotes a healthy one, becoming aware of what leads to the extinction of a Christian movement ought also to be helpful to pioneer missionaries.

Close to the end of Jenkins' book he briefly mentions and discards the idea that extinction may be accounted for by God punishing disobedient nations, as He did when the Babylonians captured and destroyed Jerusalem, taking many of its people into captivity. It seems that Jenkins found distasteful (or antiquated?) the idea that God might still punish peoples today.

Of seemingly more interest to Jenkins is a discussion about the role of Islam in God's purposes. Is Islam a global adversary in a spiritual cold war with Christianity? Is Islam a Christian heresy? Is Islam an equally valid path to God (Jenkins, 259)? Given the reality that Islam now dominates regions of the world where once lived significant Christian

populations, these questions at first thought seem to be relevant and crucial. Yet based on Jenkins' own presentation of the stories of how Christianities perished in those lands, we cannot say that the Muslim conquests in the 7th Century were also responsible for the extinction of Christianities in the 14th Century. If Christianities in Asia and Africa had died out within a few decades of the initial conquests, then it might be possible to conclude that Islam as such was the culprit. But that isn't what happened. Whether Christianity ought to be considered a forerunner of Islam or an equally valid path to God (and I certainly don't hold to either of those positions) is beside the point. It is plain that we cannot merely blame the presence or activities of any Islamic religion in Asia and Africa for the disappearance of any Christianity from Japan to Tunisia in any century. A more refined theology of extinction is required. So, while I recommend Jenkins' well-researched account on the matter of lost Christianities, what is missing from it—and Jenkins implicitly acknowledges this fact—is a theological and biblical explanation for this tragic phenomenon.

If Christianities in Africa and Asia died, not as a result of losing out in a struggle with another religion, but as a result of some other cause, what was it? Jenkins lays the blame for the extinction of Christianities at the doorstep of organized, sustained, state violence. "Based on the experiences of Christianity through history, we must stress the primary role of the state in the elimination of churches and communities" (Jenkins, 209). "The deeply rooted Christianity of Africa and Asia did not simply fade away through lack of zeal, or theological confusion: it was crushed, in a welter of warfare and persecution" (Jenkins, 100). "While religions might sicken and fade, they do not die of their own accord: they must be killed" (Jenkins, 30). In Africa and the Middle East, "... the largest single factor for Christian decline was organized violence, whether in the form of massacre, expulsion, or forced migration" (Jenkins, 141). Governments or rulers, not religions, exterminated Christianities from various lands.

Let me pause here and restate the topic. We're not just considering what may cause a religion to weaken, sicken or fade, but what actually kills it. A footnote in Jenkins' book led me to an article by James Bissett Pratt, which asserts this important distinction.

There is an oft-quoted saying that men do not usually die of that which kills them. The real cause of death is frequently an undermining disease which leaves the constitution so weak that it succumbs to the attack of some germ which under normal conditions it could easily have resisted. So it was with the religion of Egypt. It was long moribund before it died, but it held on in a dead-and-alive condition until attacked by the combined forces of Greek naturalistic philosophy, Asiatic cults, and Christianity. These gave it the final *coup de grace*. The real cause of its death was its age-long irrational conservatism (p. 101).¹

Besides the missionary theology cultivated by many churches, we also need a theology of extinction (Jenkins, 249).

I suspect that many missiologists could generate a list of factors that tend over time to weaken Christianity. Other missiologists could write up a list of factors that tend to inhibit or block its establishment, growth and spread. These are important discussions, and I am not trying to delve into any of them in this article. But Pratt makes a point of distinguishing between those factors that kill a religion and those that weaken it. In the quotation above, he is interested in identifying the chronic diseases that may afflict religions. In this short review, on the other hand, I'm seeking to identify the killer. I'm trying to pick up the implicit challenge Jenkins issued when he said that we also need a theology of extinction above and beyond the missionary theology we usually cultivate.

Reading that governments or rulers from time to time literally snuff out Christianity in a land recalls the extinction of historic churches in China and Japan, nations where Islam was not the culprit in any way. Scanning back through Moffett's two-volume work, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, one can see that it was indeed Chinese authorities who stamped out Nestorian Christianity in China in the 10th Century. Moffett discusses the possible motivations of those authorities and comes to no definite conclusion since the available data is too slim. Based on the evidence, Nestorian Christianity and other religions the Chinese government persecuted were definitely considered non-Chinese. However, it is worthwhile to note that previous regimes tolerated those same religions in China.

The story in broad outline is similar in Japan, where it was Japanese authorities who decided to exterminate Christianity there. Those authorities had the perception that Christianity was not "Japanese," not consistent with Japanese traditions and, therefore, left the people open to the displeasure of the gods. What changed from one year to the next was not the character of Christianity in Japan but the *government* of Japan. What was previously tolerated became taboo.

One imperfect Muslim example suffices to make the same point from Egyptian history. Jenkins writes that between 1293 and 1354 the Mamluks launched 4 separate campaigns to force Christians and Jews to convert to Islam (p. 125). Again, for some reasons a formerly somewhat friendly or accommodating government turned hostile to Christians. In all three instances, there seems to be a rather abrupt shift to a strongly antagonistic stance towards Christianity from one that was relatively more benign.

In trying to make sense of this phenomenon, our thoughts may wander to the Book of Acts, where the establishment of the Way in Jerusalem is soon followed by persecution.

That burst of persecution did not snuff out the Way; neither did it last very long, especially when viewed from a longer, historical perspective. Nevertheless, the persecution recorded in Acts illustrates the truth that organized violence against Christianity is sometimes normal, something to be expected, at least occasionally, but for relatively short periods of time. For those looking for any magic bullet in contextualization, note that the presence of followers of Jesus in Jerusalem and Judea disturbed the religious and social status quo, in spite of the fact that the church in Jerusalem was entirely Jewish in membership, practice and theology.

Jenkins devotes space to this contextualization factor. It exposes what for many of us is a deeply held assumption: The establishment, growth and flourishing of Christianity depends to a large extent on its degree of contextualization, on the degree to which it is considered native or natural in a given setting. Jenkins notes that a lack of contextualization and/or the presence of serious divisions within a Christian movement can make it sick, weaken it and lead to its decline. The weakening of a Christianity as a result of internal divisions or by virtue of its association with foreign elements may make it more susceptible to destruction, but I'm suggesting that those factors do not kill it.

What, then, from a "spiritual" point of view, might kill off a Christianity in a given locale? I speculate that it is Satan who either possesses or influences key government leaders so as to inflict as much harm as possible on a local Christianity. Using these people, Satan from time to time is "lucky" enough to succeed in wiping out a limb of the worldwide body of Christ. It is significant, I think, that for Jenkins evil spiritual forces, personal or impersonal, play no role in his own theologizing about, or explanation of, the extermination of a Christianity anywhere in the world. The index of his book contains not a single reference to demons, Satan, or evil spirits.

Nevertheless, in theologizing on the extinction of Christianities, we might ask on what basis God might allow Satan to succeed in utterly destroying a part of the body of Christ? Granted that Satan is powerful and hostile to God, should we expect to suffer casualties in his war against us? Why would God allow a local Christianity to become extinct?

Biblical material could help us integrate the relationship between the weakening and death of a Christianity. I propose that it is God's withdrawal of His special presence that allows Satan to wipe out a brand of the faith in a locale. In Ezekiel 8-11 we read of the step-by-step movement of God's glory out of the temple in Jerusalem, out of the city and the land (cf. Ezek. 8:6; 9:3; 10:18-20; 11:22-23). In the rationale for the

departure of God's glory from the temple in Jerusalem, human sinfulness definitely played a role. But human sinfulness in itself did not destroy it, for that was left to the Babylonians who could do so only *after* God departed from His dwelling place.

In New Testament theology, God's people are now His dwelling place. It would seem, then, that at some point in time things can get so bad in a local expression of Christianity that God is forced to withdraw His special presence from them. His withdrawal would not necessarily imply that every single person had turned away completely, for there were faithful Israelites who survived the destruction of the temple. Jenkins describes something similar occurring in Asia as conditions changed over the centuries (cf. chapter 4, "The Great Tribulation" and chapter 7, "How Faiths Die"). While some believers did die as a result of governmental persecution, others fled their home areas to resettle elsewhere. In this way local bodies of believers were destroyed while still preserving some faithful individuals through forced migration. Perhaps we should understand the human events Jenkins describes so well as a gradual emptying of God's indwelling presence from those areas? What Satan finally killed off through his government agents were empty shells of what used to contain God. Eventually, as God withdrew Himself from their midst one expression of Christianity after another was killed by Satan through the apparently normal working of human history.

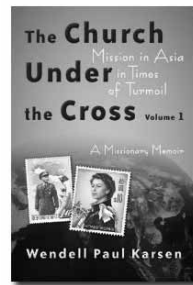
I can think of three applications of these ideas for frontier missions. First, building on the recognition that Satan uses governments to execute weak Christianities, we need to pray for government officials so that societies might be relatively peaceful, safe for new communities of Christ followers (1 Tim. 2:1-4). Second, we in our discussions about God and sin ought to emphasize more the hindering effect of our sin on God's actions among and for believers, rather than focusing so much on the effects of sin on people. Third, and more fundamentally, instead of thinking about spreading the Gospel, might we think instead of expanding the special presence of God among the nations, of making Him more accessible and available to people who do not know who He truly is? Jenkins to some extent describes a process whereby Christian communities turned inward as a means of self-preservation, tales that are obviously a warning for us today (cf. chapter 8, "The Mystery of Survival"). Following in the footsteps of those communities is a way of ensuring at least the contraction of God's special presence in our world, when just the opposite is needed. Although the dwelling of God among us must of course be protected, the burden of frontier missions is to work to expand and increase His special presence among all peoples, so that people and God may dwell together while He pours out His life among us in ever greater measures.

Endnote

¹ "Why Religions Die," James Bissett Pratt, *University of California Publications in Philosophy*, Vol. 16, No. 5, pp. 95-124, 1940.

The Church under the Cross: Mission in Asia in Times of Turmoil (vol. 1), by Wendell Paul Karsen (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI, 2010)

—reviewed by Yalin Xin



Dr. Karsen was an ordained pastor at Lakeland Reformed Church before being assigned as a missionary to Taiwan in the earlier 1970s, involving himself in the democratic and human rights movement of the Taiwanese people, for which he was recognized in an award from Taiwan Foundation for Democracy. He subsequently served in Hong Kong for almost two decades, continuing his ministry amidst a people experiencing regional changes. Karsen has also taught at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan, upon return from his overseas deployment.

Karsen's memoir of his missionary experience provides readers with an extraordinary peek into how Christians were acting or reacting to the civil and religious changes taking place at the time in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Published in the historical series of the Reformed Church in America, this volume is devoted to two periods of Karsen's missionary experience in Asia: mission in Taiwan from 1969-1973, and mission in Hong Kong from 1974-1984, and again from 1990-1998. His involvements in the socio-political and economic scenes of the two regions opens a window to readers on perspectives in Christian ministry that were often neglected: 1) that Christian ministry is meaningful only when it addresses the felt need of the people in the context; 2) that missionaries are not to shy away from the social and political struggles of the people they serve; 3) that missionaries should actively participate with the people in discovering and addressing the root of societal problems.

The first part of the book sets the scene for the socio-political situation in Taiwan, a time when the Nationalist government was still a fresh new regime and ruled the people in Taiwan with an iron fist. The people were at the receiving end of harsh rule, being oppressed and exploited, and the church was caught right in the middle, being under constant suspicion and surveillance from the government. This was a reality, as Karsen astoundingly found out, that was contradictory to the promise that China Lobbyists (for the Nationalist cause in Taiwan) made in the US. And it was not very long before Karsen needed to make a choice: to identify himself with the oppressed by participating in the cause of justice and human rights, or to distance himself from this responsibility. Would he join in "exposing the evils that were going around us, opposing those evils

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in any way we would, and deposing the perpetrators of the evils when and where possible” (p. 74)?

Karsen chose to play an active role in standing with the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan (PCT), advocating the need for the Church to be critical of social injustice in Taiwan and addressing the root of problems. PCT, with its 167,000 membership, stood strong through a turbulent time in the earlier 1970s, voicing the plight of the Taiwanese people under a Nationalist regime that disregarded human rights. Through campus ministry and publication, Karsen engaged seminary and university students in facing the socio-political issues of the time and addressing them from a Christian perspective. He also worked closely with national leaders such as Andrew Hsieh and Peng Ming-min in solidarity with the Taiwanese people’s struggle for democracy and human rights. On account of this, he and his family were eventually denied visas to return to Taiwan while on furlough in the U.S.

For the next two decades, following his exit from Taiwan in 1973, Karsen continued his overseas missionary involvement in Hong Kong, a dramatically different context from Taiwan. Before he critically examines the stand taken by Hong Kong churches, Karsen provides brief background information on colonial Hong Kong, as he did in the previous section on Taiwan. He helps orient readers to the complexity and the ‘fundamental inequities’ of the region. He identifies how “privileged position,” “security,” and “fundamentalist” belief prevented churches in Hong Kong from addressing the root of an unjust system in the region. As a result, “Christians by and large had been natural partners for the British in developing a society within the colony that was built on the pillars of power and profit” (p. 231).

Since the 70s, however, in the midst of political and social change in the colony, a new generation of Christian leaders emerged on the scene, “engaging in fresh theological thinking” and challenging the status quo (p. 234). Churches were awakened to their inescapable responsibility of being a prophetic witness in the society, and started to be actively involved in labor reforms, educational reforms, and social reforms and political reforms. As the director of Hong Kong Christian Council’s Communications Centre, Karsen and the staff were instrumental in providing an “outlet for Christian reform advocates and church leaders to express themselves on public issues during the crucial decades leading up to 1997” (p. 286). Karsen identifies a “seminal event”

toward the end of 1980. At a consultation on the mission of the church in Hong Kong, church leaders across denominations joined hands to advocate that the church “stand up and challenge the Hong Kong government in the areas of government policy, justice, and the plight of the poor” (p. 290).

This is a fascinating account of a very personal missionary journey as well as testimony to the work of God among Christians in Taiwan and Hong Kong in the last three decades of the 20th century. The author is obviously very familiar with issues at stake, with personal experience and involvement on the one hand, and serious documentation and research on the other. It is insightful and informational. In telling his own story, Karsen gives due acknowledgement to Christians he served within both regions, of their struggle, bravery and faith. From a Christian Reformed perspective, Karsen makes his points loud and clear: Christians should actively support or criticize the sociopolitical systems for the sake of justice, peace and good for all. He was insightful in appealing to Christians to directly address the root problems of the political and economic system rather than just “applying Band-Aids to social sores” (p. 231).

Karsen moved beyond a singular concern for the injustice and oppressive political systems to include Christian involvement in other spheres—education, economy and social work—which he deems important in the efforts to address root problems of Taiwan and Hong Kong. These glimpses of his efforts are helpful in providing a more holistic picture of the life and ministry of Christians in these unique contexts. But more might need to be uncovered than these Christian initiatives if we are to understand the overall process and results. The task of a future book might reveal how Christians identify, integrate and address the multi-faceted human problems in these regions, rooted as they are within socio-cultural, economic, political, and spiritual spheres. **IJFM**