by both a practice-based argument and concrete examples of communities of virtue that flourish within the practice of a political/legal order based on norms of liberty.

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From the professor of History and Religious Studies at Penn State and author of Pedophiles and Priests comes this fascinating study on the future of Christianity in our world. While it is fashionable for believers to lament the loss of faith of the “post-Christian” nations of Europe and the other First World nations, Jenkins instead points to the explosive growth of Christianity in the poorer nations of the Third World to give a more realistic and hopeful view of the future of Christianity. On the way, he challenges us to look at the historical spread of Christianity with far different eyes, offering an analysis that is part of a recent trend of reassessment of where Christianity has been, and where it is going.

Christianity has long been associated almost wholly with Christendom; that is to say, the political and social entity of Europe. When one thinks of the spread of Christianity in these terms, one thinks of the Crusades, of Spanish conquistadors in the New World, and of the mercantilists and imperialists of half a dozen European nations, who spread their faith along with their European hegemony. The time has come, Jenkins notes, for us to reassess this view of where Christianity came from, and where it is going. The reality is that, from its very beginnings, Christianity was first and foremost a Middle Eastern, African, and Asian phenomenon. In its first few centuries, despite communities growing in what would later be Europe, Christianity’s roots and focus always lay in the “East.” From the development of Christian theological thought, to the creation of institutions such as Christian monasticism, places like Egypt, Syria, and North Africa were far more important than anywhere in Europe. Jenkins is at pains to remind the reader that even events such as the fall of Rome and the subsequent advance of Islam into the heartland of Christianity were not as transforming as we so often assume. Even though under Islamic rule,
places such as Egypt, Palestine, and Anatolia retained large and influential Christian communities—even majorities—for many centuries. Some of these communities, though much-reduced, are still present—witness the former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, a Coptic Christian from Egypt, as an example. Furthermore, even in places which fell under European hegemony from the 15th century onward (and emerged from it in the 19th and 20th centuries), Christianity is now far from being treated as the unwelcome foreign imposition so many modern liberals paint it out to be. Rather, it is frequently an influential, and very welcome, part of daily life. All in all, world-wide Christianity has never been coterminous with a European “Christendom,” and Jenkins’ book is worth reading on this theme alone.

Proceeding from this premise, Jenkins surveys what he thinks the likely future of Christianity will be. He ably contrasts the moribund church attendance figures and plummeting birth rates of the first Christendom, Europe, with the large church attendance figures and soaring birthrates of what he views as the “next Christendom”: Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia. Honest demographics and sociology leave no room for doubt: while Christianity is dying out in the First World, it is exploding in the Third. Indeed, Jenkins believes that the truly influential religious force of the 21st century will not be Islam, as so many pundits assume, but rather Christianity, and that the new world polarity will not be East/West, but rather North/South.

What will be the nature of Christianity in this “next Christendom?” Very different from that in Europe and America, and different in a way that is likely to cause problems in the relationship of co-religionists in both regions. First-World Christianity is by and large wealthy, liberal, rationalist, and sedate. By contrast, Third-World Christianity is poor, conservative, supernaturalist, and vibrant, in a way that is often shocking to First-World sensibilities. Third-World Christianity leans very much towards the charismatic, in both its devotions and its practices. It features ecstatic worship, prophetic visions, and apocalyptic conceptions. In particular, it is very much focused on the supernatural world, on the realities of demons and sorcery, and on the need for exorcisms and faith healings. In other matters, though, it is deeply conservative theologically, rejecting outright such liberal touchstones as abortion, feminism, homosexual rights, and even, at times, contraceptives. Faced with such realities, Jenkins concludes that “brown” Christianity will come to outpace “white” Christianity, and that the locus of Christianity will shift to the “next Christendom” of the South. Indeed, in some ways Christianity has come full circle, and has its strongest appeal amongst poor, struggling people...
in need of healing they cannot afford and a consolation that the world cannot give them—in short, the sort of people to whom Christianity appealed the first time around, in the days of the New Testament.

The Next Christendom is not a work of triumphalism, though. Jenkins is at pains to point out that the differences in practice and styles of worship are already causing problems in the relations between “old Christendom” and “next Christendom” believers, as we have already seen in the controversies over ordained homosexuals in the Anglican communion, with the spectacles of Anglican communities in England placing themselves under the jurisdiction of African bishops to avoid the problem! Furthermore, Jenkins does not minimize the dangers that Islam currently poses and will continue to pose to Christians in the “next Christendom”—Islam is going through one of its militant and expansionistic phases, and the deaths of large numbers of Christians at Muslim hands (one of the most under-reported facts in the modern media) are a reality that will only get worse in time. Then there is the situation of immigration to consider: Third-World religious folk, Muslim and Christian, have been emigrating to dying First-World nations in large numbers, bringing their frequently-unwelcome beliefs with them. The Next Christendom was written before last year's large-scale Muslim riots in France and Australia, and First-World nations are not considering that the only force vigorous enough to resist an imported Islam may be an imported Third-World Christianity. Still, while The Next Christendom is not a triumphalistic work, it will, for the right reader, be a great occasion for reflection and much hope. While I am a post-Vatican II Catholic, I am still old enough to remember collections for the missions, and the nuns saying that, one day, priests from those mission lands would come to serve us. When I reflect on the fact that, of the three priests under my supervision at work, one is from Argentina and one from Uganda, I have daily proof of how right Jenkins is. Some years ago, a friend in Britain lamented living in a “post-Christian” society. I took him to task: no age is “post-Christian”; rather, we are living in a “post-Christendom” society, but even in that I was wrong, for as Jenkins notes, the next Christendom is on its way.

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