

Global gospel: Christianity is alive and well in the Southern Hemisphere

by [Sara Miller](#) in the [July 17, 2002](#) issue

Christians throughout history may be justly accused of many failures, but it appears neglecting evangelism is not one of them. Observers of Christian growth have been suggesting over the last few decades that the faith is experiencing a significant migratory moment, not unlike the first explosive venture outside the tribe of the Jews into the unfamiliar world of the gentiles. That movement internationalized Christianity, then Hellenized it and eventually Europeanized it. The point historians of religion make is that Christian expansion was not just a matter of adding more people but of adding other people and cultures to its family. The point missiologists would add is that evangelization did not succeed by assimilating local cultures but by converting them. That is how a religion with a Palestinian homeland came to be associated with a European heartland.

Now the map has changed again, and in this geographical shift lies the future of Christianity. Historian Philip Jenkins of Penn State University believes the recent burgeoning of Christianity in the non-Western world could represent a seminal moment in Christian history, perhaps even world history. Jenkins has marshaled the statistical evidence and the scholarship in his new book, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*.

A capsule of his findings would include the following facts: Over the past century, Christian populations in the West have either been holding steady or declining, while in Africa, Asia and Latin America—the “global South” in current geopolitical coinage—the numbers have been rising significantly and in some cases dramatically. Today there are more Christians living in the global South than in Europe, North America, Russia and Japan. Roughly two-thirds of all Protestants live outside Europe and North America. This is partly a reflection of general population trends in both the South (rising) and the West (steady at best), and of the triumph of secularism in Western nations.

But the statistics also reveal something far more meaningful: a boom in conversions across the South and the rise of new and independent churches. Not only are there more people in the developing world but more of those people are becoming Christian. In 1965 the Christian population in Africa was around 25 percent of the continental total. Today it is 46 percent. In 1920 there were some 300,000 Christians in Korea; today there are between 10 and 12 million, approximately 25 percent of the total population.

Add to this the fact that many of the largest and fastest growing megacities, among them São Paulo, Manila, Mexico City, Kinshasa and Kampala, already boast large and in a few cases majority Christian populations—and these are swelling too. In some cities churches can't be built fast or big enough. Moreover, while this growth is occurring across denominations, and within the mainline churches as well as newer, independent churches, some of the most striking gains are occurring within the Pentecostal or charismatic fold. Even the traditional churches—Catholic, Anglican, Methodist and so on—have themselves developed a more “spirited” style since the great missionary period, first in convergence with local religious expression, more recently in response to evangelical pressures. If Pentecostal groups, independent churches and charismatic movements continue to gain converts, the traditional denominations may lean even further in that direction. For Jenkins this all adds up to the possibility that the Western model of Christianity, for so long a conceptual affair, could soon be superseded by a decidedly charismatic Southern model.

There are worlds of difference between Korean Pentecostal movements and African independent churches, between mainline Catholicism in the Philippines and evangelical Protestantism in Brazil, Jenkins observes. African Christianity by itself is a many-splendored thing, with prophet-healing churches, radical charismatic sects, new Pentecostal groups, plus strong traditional congregations. But there are some common characteristics. “The most important one,” Jenkins says, “is the idea of the direct, divine intervention in daily life. The idea that religion can provide healing of mind, body and soul, and the three can't be separated, is an absolutely fundamental notion in the South.”

“That's obviously not an idea that's unfamiliar in the West,” he adds. “You can go to many Pentecostal churches and say, ‘I'm sick,’ or even, ‘I'm possessed,’ and they will try to cure you. If you go to an Episcopal or Catholic church they will point you to an emergency ward, and they might even point you to a psychiatric emergency ward. And I think that's the fundamental difference.”

The mainstream tendency to discount or rationalize the supernatural leads to all sorts of Western anxieties when confronting the spectacle of world Christianity. “I think there is a genuine embarrassment/horror when people in the West look at, for instance, some of the Pentecostal traditions, and I’m always very worried when people look at Asian or African religion and present it as a kind of syncretism, as a kind of survival of the pagan,” says Jenkins. “In virtually every case you can see exactly where they’re getting these ideas: they’re getting them from the New Testament. That may be the single biggest factor that people writing on Third World Christianity often miss, which is the completely biblical nature of a lot of what’s happening.”

In fact, Jenkins says, his own research “radically changed the way I read the New Testament. It has made it make much more sense. You tend to see the quantities of space that are devoted to certain themes that we tend to skip over. The New Testament is a book about miracles; it is a book about healings, exorcism, how to deal with persecution. If you take those themes you’ve probably got—and this is a totally nonscientific figure—about 85 percent of all four Gospels. Just open the New Testament at random and I bet you’re going to find something about healings, exorcisms, persecutions and miracles.”

“We tend to read very selectively. When we read a passage like, ‘Don’t worry what happens when you’re called before a judge, the Holy Spirit will tell you what to say,’ that doesn’t really mean much. But it’s really good practical, worldly advice if you live in a lot of countries.”

Many if not most Southern Christians endure conditions and afflictions the West has largely overcome: poverty, persecution, disease, exile. Their world may look nothing like ours, Jenkins says, but it bears a striking resemblance to the world of the New Testament. Churches can offer sanctuary, community and a social safety net where governments can’t or won’t, and they can also offer what the New Testament offers: divine assistance. Jenkins believes this fit between the New Testament and the needs and aspirations of the developing world is in large part what makes Christianity so appealing.

This does not preclude Christianity’s being compatible with local faiths. Jenkins observes that local beliefs about visions, prophecy and healing have also contributed to Southern Christianity’s distinctive supernaturalism. Other scholars concur. Missiologist and historian Lamin Sanneh of Yale Divinity School has written

widely and deeply on the flowering of Christianity in Africa, from the second century through the mission period to the present, and he believes the seeds of success were already present in African soil. "Christianity," says Sanneh, "came into Africa equally as fulfillment and challenge, but in either case as reinforcement of the religious worldview of Africans concerning spiritual and divine agency, the sacramental sense of community, the ties between the living and the dead, the potency of dreams, prayers and invocations."

But the old religions, Sanneh notes, "had only a limited ethical range: the family, the clan, the village, the tribe. Small-scale societies insulated people from historical pressures and thus removed the need for adjustments in people's worldview. Christianity answered this historical challenge by a reorientation of the worldview so that the old moral framework was reconfigured without being overthrown."

Christianity has always, if fitfully, adapted itself to local languages, customs and even rival religions. Yet inculturation is not the process of making Christianity adaptable but of making it believable. In fact, Spiritan Father Anthony Gittins, a former missionary in Sierra Leone and now professor of missiology at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, points out that inculturation is what happens not between cultures but between God and culture. "When we're talking about inculturation, the first word that comes to mind is 'faith.' Not Christianity, because Christianity is culture. So the question then is how do you get Christianity, as a culture, and Africa or America, as a culture, to create a new form of faith. That's inculturation."

Gittins calls this new form of faith a "hitherto unknown or unimagined part of the body of Christ," much as Jesus was a hitherto unknown revelation of God. The incarnation, in a sense, was the first act of Christian inculturation. But the fact that Jesus himself was enculturated, or socialized, by a Jewish culture under Roman authority suggests "why it would not be sufficient for me to be exactly like Jesus," Gittins observes. Jesus himself had a "context," in other words. So did the disciples, so do we, and so does the gospel. The gospel is "already recontextualized . . . we take the recontextualized gospel and recontextualize it for our own lives. At least that's what we're supposed to be doing. We're not here to do an archaeological re-dig. Practically speaking, inculturation, which would be the local incarnation of the local church, has to be a local experience."

Nonetheless, “the old medieval adage about things being received according to the recipient is the great stumbling block for inculturation in the Roman tradition,” Gittins admits. Despite a highly articulated theory of inculturation, he says, the structures of centralization and hierarchy in the Catholic Church are major obstacles. “If you think that the context becomes the ground on which the seed of the gospel grows, and if you’re willing to allow the gospel to fall onto rocky ground or fertile ground, then you will tend to cultivate the context on the understanding that whatever grows out of it is at least some kind of an authentic expression of Christianity. But Roman Catholicism is a little leery of context, because context bespeaks local church, and local church is always in tension with universal church.”

The tension becomes frustratingly evident, he adds, in the efforts of those on the ground who “want to pursue the local but then begin to lose their nerve because they feel they’re becoming too parochial—people of initiative, people of courage, pastors and local communities, who try to pursue the agenda of inculturation nevertheless looking over their shoulder all the time wondering when they’re going to be asked or called to account.” Says Gittins: “If I go to Africa and sit down in a local community, far away from the centers of power, I can actually get on with inculturation, and in fact that is the only way I can get on with inculturation.”

But new Christian communities also want to belong to the larger church, especially in a globalized world. “They want both to emphasize their indigeneity and to emphasize their relationship to what is beyond,” Gittins says. “Thirty years ago,” he recalls, “I was in West Africa, and there was an ordination to the priesthood of a young African. And I sat with the local community for a long time to determine how we were going to do this ordination—what kind of music and what kind of dance and what kind of liturgy—and I was all gung-ho for the fact that they had so many possible ways of incarnating the liturgy through their own African embodiment and rhythms and so forth, but they were absolutely adamant: they wanted Gregorian chant. And when I asked them why they wanted Gregorian chant they said, ‘Because this is how we know that we are universal, we are catholic.’ And I couldn’t persuade them otherwise.”

Local cultures do have the habit of frustrating Western desires for them. Jenkins notes that Western Christians looking south are continually finding their own agendas reflected there, with mixed results. “There’s a great ‘mirror effect’ if you look at what people wrote about African and Latin American theologians in the ‘60s, ‘70s and ‘80s. The view in the West was, ‘Oh, this is wonderful, they’re saying all

these things we wanted to hear.' Of course they were! They'd all been educated at Cambridge and Harvard and Louvain and they were just feeding back what they'd been taught in the West." Today, Jenkins points out, in light of the moral conservatism of Southern cultures and of rising Pentecostal Christianity, it is Western conservatives who like what they see.

Fears of the gospel being corrupted, Jenkins argues, are largely unfounded. Even the independent churches and radical evangelical groups remain recognizably within the tradition and usually preach a "strong and even pristine Christian message." What these rising communities really signal, Jenkins believes, is a deep spiritual hunger in the developing world and the wide appeal of the Christian God and the Christian story even where local religious faith is strong—perhaps especially there. Even in the West, "Christianity is a much odder religion than many of us think," he observes. "You have all these strange, strange religions, many of which claim to be variants of Christianity and are denounced as cults, but actually when you look at them, maybe they have as much claim to be authentic as anything else."

In fact, the issue of syncretism is largely a straw man in the view of these scholars, albeit for different reasons. Sanneh says "syncretism represents the unresolved, unassimilated and tension-filled mixing of Christian ideas with local custom and ritual, and that scarcely results in the kind of fulfilling change signaled by conversion and church membership. Besides, syncretism is the term we use for the religion of those we do not like. No one calls himself or herself a syncretist!"

Perhaps, Sanneh allows, "local ideas of spirit possession have persisted into Pentecostalism and into other forms of enthusiastic religion. . . . The difference now [is] that instead of the disruptions of exorcisms and witchcraft eradication rites we have the Lord's anointed being vindicated with miracles, signs and wonders."

Anthony Gittins observes that "anthropologists have spoken for years and years about the inevitability of syncretism, and they've become a little bit more sophisticated in talking about bad syncretism and good syncretism. But when you hear mainstream theologians talking about syncretism it is always and everywhere wrong. And it is always and everywhere whatever happens when Catholicism encounters something else. Well, there's no way you can move forward if you've got that kind of attitude."

Actually, Gittins offers, “it is probably still true to say that there are far more cultural Christians in the United States than there are Christians, and it is certainly worth arguing that there are more African cultural Christians than there are African evangelical, disciple-like Christians as some of the theologians would like to imagine. And it’s too easy to accuse everybody else of being syncretic when in point of fact the normal way of receiving Christianity is in a syncretic kind of way. The very superficial epidermis of the cross-section of Christianity is a theological orthodoxy, but beneath that the flesh of Christianity is not very theological in an articulated way and it is not very orthodox. The kind of orthopraxy that exists among many Christians is a devotional orthopraxy, or a syncretic orthopraxy, and so long as some of the clergy don’t know about that, it coexists, and to the degree that some of the clergy find out about it, they get themselves terribly excited and think that they should be able to eradicate it.”

“There are a number of voices,” says Gittins, “and one listens to them sympathetically, but at the end of the day I think they don’t detract from the principle of inculturation as synonymous with incarnation of the faith in particular places in the contemporary world.”

Pentecostal conversions in Latin America mostly account for the Protestant “sweep” of the continent that so alarms the Catholic Church. Allowing that these defections from Catholicism may have been overestimated, Jenkins says the rapid increase in conversions is nonetheless phenomenal, and in some countries—Guatemala, Chile, Brazil—Pentecostals already represent a powerful numeric bloc. In their book *Pentecostalism and the Future of the Churches*, Richard Shaull, emeritus professor of ecumenics at Princeton Theological Seminary, and his colleague Waldo Cesar, a Brazilian sociologist, argue that Pentecostalism may represent a new paradigm of salvation in which the problem of human sin and the solution of repentance and forgiveness have been reconfigured along more hopeful, even joyful lines. “Pentecostals,” Shaull says, “discover that their experience of salvation—as the gift of life in the midst of death—incorporates them into a dynamic movement of the Spirit for the reconstruction of broken lives.” Shaull describes his and Cesar’s encounter with Pentecostals as “entering into a type of spirituality in which experience is fundamental and sets the terms for everything else.” And, he adds, “at the center of their new life is a call to evangelism, to make this life available to all.”

But the evangelistic impetus alone does not explain why Pentecostals have had such extraordinary success, Shaull says. “I think the reason lies in the fact that this

present globalized economy leaves masses of people uprooted and abandoned on the periphery of ever growing large cities, where they are engaged in a desperate struggle for daily survival. Moreover, all the structures that normally sustain human life in community are breaking down. In this situation they are seeking and finding in Pentecostalism an experience of the Divine which helps them to put their lives together, heals their wounds, and gives them hope for the future.”

The middle classes, for their part, “are realizing that their dreams of upward mobility for themselves and their children will not be realized, and they find few if any political options which challenge them. In this situation, they are also looking for a spiritual experience that might give meaning and purpose to their lives.” Yet Shaull considers this “much less important than what is happening in the Pentecostalism of the poor. Poor Pentecostals often experience a presence and power that turns their lives around and compels them to struggle for a new future.” For them it is often a radical experience of “supporting life in precarious forms of community,” he explains. “That is why, at least in Latin America, a Pentecostal experience focused on day-to-day reality may well become a major force for social change.”

“The older Pentecostal movements,” Shaull notes, “have been quite moralistic and quite conservative. But it’s important to remember that this is often challenged within Pentecostalism by those who are open to the possibility that life ‘in the Spirit’ doesn’t always settle for this moralism. This is especially true in the Universal Church of the Reign of God, which has already challenged the traditional moralism in other movements.”

“In many Pentecostal movements,” Shaull points out, “women have no part in ministry, no leadership role. At the same time, in Brazil, there is one offshoot of the Universal Church started by women and largely directed by them, and the testimony of many women is that their experience of the Spirit has given them a new identity. They have ‘gifts’ of healing, prophecy, discernment, etc. And their newfound strength leads them to gradually change the pattern of relationship with their husbands, and contribute to the conversion of many and thus to the transformation of family life.”

Shaull perceives signs that Pentecostal movements are gradually coming into their own. “They no longer have to prove to Protestants that they are evangelical,” he observes, “and as their numbers increase and they move farther away from their origins in North America, they are less influenced by fundamentalism.” Shaull

believes that Pentecostal movements today have a much larger space than before in which to develop their own unique life in the Spirit—“if they keep closely connected with their biblical roots.”

The importance in the global South of “biblical roots,” and the ability of the Christian scriptures to attract and convert, or claim and be claimed, can hardly be overstated. Jenkins sees striking instances in Western Christianity as well. “It’s always very strange if you read the 17th-century Puritans in, say, Scotland or England, because they would say things like, ‘And we have traveled across the whole land from Dan to Beersheba.’ Now obviously they’re not living in Palestine. What they’ve done is annex the whole story of the Bible as their internal reality.” The Bible, says Jenkins, offers a complete world history and a complete ethic. “It’s an astonishingly complete package. And I certainly would not underestimate the idea of an aesthetic appeal. In different ways, different kinds of Christianity have this immense power for people who love words. The Christian scriptures are immensely powerful and they’re often in your own language.”

For Sanneh, translation is crucial to the success of evangelization. “Bible translation has marked the history of Christianity from its very origins,” he points out. “The Gospels are a translated version of the preaching and message of Jesus, and the Epistles a further interpretation and application of that preaching and message.” It was through vernacular translation in particular, he adds, that Christianity could offer the world “a genuine share in the heritage of Jesus.” Mother-tongue translation “conforms to the insight of the incarnation, namely, that divinity is not a human loan word but rather humanity is the chosen language of divine self-expression.”

In Africa, Sanneh explains, “the African names for God were adopted almost without exception as the name of the God of the Bible,” with potent results then and now. “In Nigeria, Yoruba converts to Christianity have the rich heritage of Ifa divination to draw upon. The name for savior, Olugbala, for instance, is preloaded with older Yoruba theological notions of divine solicitude and redemption.”

Some Yoruba terms for God are startlingly suggestive in the Christian context: the “One who came whom we have put to death with cudgels causelessly”; the “One who is mightiest among the gods and prevailed to do on a certain occasion what they could not.” Sometimes the language is ordinary, almost bashful. The Maasai of East Africa cast their African Creed in similarly concrete terms, says Sanneh, in notable contrast to the abstract Christology of the West. “The Jesus of the African

Creed is a historical figure, steeped in his Jewish culture, swept up in the controversies of the day," Sanneh explains. "The Maasai speak of a journey of faith in a God who out of love created the world and us, of how they once knew the High God in darkness but now they know this God in the light. The creed continues with God's promises in scripture and momentously in Jesus, 'a man in the flesh, a Jew by tribe, born poor in a little village, who left his home and was always on safari doing good, curing people by the power of God,' until finally he was rejected by his people, tortured and nailed hands and feet to a cross, and died. Then the irony of the historical Jesus is clinched with a stunning understatement with the words, 'He lay buried in the grave, but the hyenas did not touch him, and on the third day he rose from the grave.'"

Such refreshed, hope-filled language and the theology it inspires could have reverberating benefits in the West. "The tradition of exegesis that has been practiced in the West seems to have run its course," Sanneh says. "There are too many instances of recycling and cultural off-loading for us not to think that the envelope can't be pushed much further." And yet, in Africa and elsewhere fresh materials are "being introduced into scripture, prayers, hymns and liturgy" which could have an effect on "how people in the West think and speak about the gospel and the church." This creativity could have a tonic effect on the West's "twilight" mood, Sanneh suggests. "The African Creed may be the sign that the indigenization and inculturation of the gospel stand to benefit the wider church."

Gittins agrees that African Christianity is bounteous with riches, particularly in the area of theology, but worries that in the Catholic Church "a lot of the liturgical appurtenances of Africa tend to be regarded as baubles by the universal church." Local communities, he says, "are not able to understand themselves as mature, grown-up, interdependent churches. One of the best examples is the Zairean liturgy, which should have been called the 'Zairean Liturgy,' but it is called the 'Liturgy of the Roman Rite for Zaire.' In other words, it has been co-opted, it has been colonized by the Roman Rite."

Gittins suggests the most transformative aspect of African Christianity concerns "the question of integration over against the disintegration of life." He explains that in the U.S. "we identify the separation of church and state and we regard the separation as a value. In Africa you would identify the encounter between religion and life, and marriage, and hunting, and every aspect of daily life as part and parcel. So the implications . . . are that religion should penetrate every part of life or it is no

use. In our Western culture we can privatize and isolate religion and think it is a whole lot of use. So one of the things that I've learned not only from Africa but from elsewhere in the world and from other kinds of people is the idea that it is rather idle for us to think of religion in separation from, and unless we can think of it in integration with, we'll never be able to discover its potential."

But to integrate, Gittins points out, does not necessarily mean to harmonize. The gospel challenges, it confronts. Sanneh says the fact that the indigenized gospel is both "novel and patriotic" makes it a force for moral reckoning in the prevailing culture. The biblical promise of liberation, for example, was clearly resonant during the period of American slavery. "I became convinced after my study of the subject in *Abolitionists Abroad*," says Sanneh, "that 18th-century evangelical Christianity represented a social revolution of enormous import for the New World and for Africa by offering outcasts, slaves and captives a moral perspective on their oppression and exclusion. . . . The universal message of divine empowerment is particularly potent in situations of social injustice and political privilege. I had not seen it that clearly before. At any rate, outcasts, slaves, and captives responded overwhelmingly to the gospel, resulting in the first mass movement of blacks into Christianity. Christianity in that sense is more than the nemesis of slavery; it is the nemesis, on the right, of hereditary privilege and natural entitlement, and, on the left, of ideologies of power and state absolutization."

The colonial "imposition" of Christianity was never the whole story. Where issues of liberty and oppression are unresolved in the global South today—and that is a large area—Christianity is frequently a catalyst for reform. This is true in newly independent states and in older colonial offspring where conservative traditions have dominated. Jenkins notes that in Latin America and in the Philippines—two obvious examples—Catholic Christianity has found itself in alliance with power but also in opposition. Shaull says he sees even more evidence today of Pentecostal involvement in social struggles. "In fact, I have seen several groups of creative Pentecostals who have basically accepted liberation theology while revitalizing and transforming it by bringing their experience of the Spirit into the center of it."

Even in the West, the notion that freedom grows in opposition to the church is something of a popular mythology, says Jenkins. "The whole idea of representative democracy is actually a medieval idea, not Greek. The other example is that very often what seem to be some of the most intolerant or narrow Christian ideas over time evolve into the greatest version of liberty and enlightenment. Calvinism was

incredibly restrictive—you know, ruled by ‘ayatollahs.’ But if you look at the Calvinist states, they are the centers of the Enlightenment. So maybe that is a suggestion that some of these new kinds of Christianity do contain within themselves the seeds of liberty.”

The rise of global Christianity reveals another, equally challenging feature. To the surprise even of those who have proclaimed it, a “preferential option for the poor” might actually be coming to pass in this new dawn. Jenkins is not alone in observing that the dominant economic fact in Southern Christianity today is poverty, despite the great gains the faith has made among industrializing, middle-class populations, notably in Asia. Modernization and secularization may eventually mitigate this feature, he allows, but for now the fact that Christianity is weak in the cradles of affluence and robust in the crucibles of need is both provocative and suggestive. “When you look at the New Testament,” he reflects, “I do think this idea of a special affinity for the poor is there. It’s certainly an idea that the early Christians were concerned about. That’s why you get that famous dialogue about the rich man passing through the eye of a needle. As you read some of those passages and you think how they are conventionally handled in a church sermon on a Sunday—it’s interesting. How do people tackle things like ‘Sell all you have’? They say, ‘Well, obviously Jesus doesn’t really mean that.’” For Gittins it is a question of “whether the increase in our material sophistication makes us insensitive to the demands of Christianity, and I think the answer is yes.”

Whatever the demands—and the promises—of Christianity in the West may be, they appear to have retreated more and more behind the altars of private life, even private imagination. To take the public Jesus at his word is by now, for many Christians, simply unthinkable. But in the global South the gospel promise is alive, and the sense of expectation is palpable. “I have witnessed eager crowds pressing to get into church,” remarks Sanneh, “their only motivation being their irrepressible desire to be included in the fellowship of faith.” Perhaps in the dawning of Southern Christianity the West might begin to glimpse, if not the substance of things hoped for, at least a ray or two to dispel what Sanneh calls the “lengthening shadows” over Western Christianity. Heaven is not closed, and today doors are opening across the South. As the Maasai announce at the conclusion of their creed: We are waiting for Him. He is alive. He lives. This we believe. Amen.