

Global Winds Are Changing the Face of Christianity

Jenkins' book stirs provocative ChristianTrade spiritual and business plan discussions, call for indigenous writers

The wind blows where it wishes. You hear the sound of it, but don't know where it comes from or where it's going, Jesus tells Nicodemus in John 3:8, helping the questioning Pharisee understand what being born again means.

Many Christians see the wind symbolizing God's Spirit as He moves in people's hearts and across lands—and the Spirit's moving among peoples in the Global South stirred provocative discussions during the Christian Trade Association International (ChristianTrade) gathering this summer in Denver, Colorado, during CBA's ICRS.

Academic, theological, and practical themes bounced off each other as 734 internationals from 52 countries around the globe gathered in the United States, wrestling with implications of Christianity's dynamic Developing World growth, cultural relevancy, denominationalism, and conflict with radical Islam. A new way of referring to the geography of this challenge was adopted – the Global South.

If there were conclusions everybody agreed on, it was that local-Christian voices need to be heard, and that developing local Christian publishing must be a ministry priority. Philip Jenkins, Pennsylvania State University history and religious-studies professor, spoke at ChristianTrade's International Vision Celebration about his new book, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (Oxford University Press). The book raises the question of whose Christianity is normal now? Is it the conservative, supernatural-focused Christianity of the Global South, or the liberalized, morally and culturally relevant brand of the North America and Western Europe?

By nature of geography as well as social, economic, and political conditions, Christianity's massive Global South growth has created a very different Christian context, Jenkins contends. He says globally the average Christian is very poor, compared to North-American and Western-European standards, and typically is among a social minority dominated by other religions, secular ideologies, or dictators.

In the North, wealth, science, and social liberalism have sterilized biblical theology and Christian mores. In many cases, even Christian leaders and theologians have reconstructed biblical teachings—born in rural, agrarian societies—to appeal to industrial society's pluralism, individualism, materialism, and moral relevancy.

Generally in the Global South, Jenkins says, Christians identify more with agrarian realities of poverty and debt, famine and farming, urban crisis, racial and gender oppression, state brutality and persecution that the Bible depicts. These conditions today “illuminate the transience of life, the dependence of individuals and nations on God, and distrust of the secular order,” Jenkins says.

These stark realities and contrasts have created North-South divisions in personal and social Christian beliefs and how biblical interpretations, teachings and religious “styles” are accepted and applied within different cultures.

“Christianity must be seen as a force for radical change rather than obscurantism, for unsettling hierarchies rather than preserving them,” Jenkins observes, cautioning that these divides could have tremendous social and theological impact on both sides of the equator.

David Waweru, CEO of World Alive Publishers in Kenya, agreed, but challenged Jenkins’ assessments on spiritual grounds, not cultural or historical ones.

“The Biblical Idea of the Christian Global South vis-à-vis that of the Euro-American Christianity is not the central heart of Christian belief,” Waweru said. “If the Bible is being rejected or is being re-written to fit into the culture of Euro-American Christianity, on the one hand, while on the other hand, the Bible is being accepted or is being re-interpreted to fit into the culture of the Christian Global South, have we not handed the Bible to culture for its exclusive definition?”

Waweru asked where the middle ground is between “the homosexual heretic of Euro-American Christianity and the syncretistic neo-pagan of the Christian Global South?” “What would new definitions and readings of the Bible from the conservative, fundamentalist and the Biblicist Christian South give to the modernist, liberal, and secularist Euro-American Christians?” Waweru asked. “Is it because of (the Global South’s) numerical strength or that the center of gravity of Christianity has shifted South?”

If Euro-American Christians have believed the Bible for centuries, turning away now can’t be because of culture or history, Waweru said. “This is a falling away, or apostasy.” He said Christians have to go beyond Jenkins’ book to find answers to the emerging faces of Christianity, and those answers are not only socio-historical and cultural, but theological and spiritual as well.

A Call for Local Voices

These discussions are prompting a louder call to develop indigenous writers and help get local leaders’ messages and theology more broadly distributed—both in the local community and throughout the world. On one level, local writers could drive local evangelism as well as literacy and social progress. On another level, the purpose would open dialogue and increase communication so Christians around the globe may better understand each other. On even another level, indigenous Global South publishing could support missionary outreach into the Global North where watered-down Christianity might be reconstituted into a more potent spiritual concoction.

Publishers Speak Out

Stephen Spies, CEO of Lux Verbi in South Africa, said Christian churches and publishers must re-engineer themselves to reach the Global South. He said in South Africa, publishers have seen 20%-30% annual sales growth for the past 10 years, but it has been primarily among the 600,000 to 800,000 white South Africans. “There are 40 million blacks in South Africa, 25 million that are high potential buyers. This is our responsibility, and we are not meeting it,” he said.

Don Price, CEO of Vida Nova in Brazil, pointed out that the bottom of the social pyramid is transitioning to literacy, “so we have a tremendous task before us if we are going to produce literature that is acculturated.” He said indigenous publishers must develop writers, and that could take a generation to accomplish. “If North American and European publishers are really interested in the future of Christian publishing, they should invest in developing writers from Africa, Asia, and Latin America.”

Kenya’s Waweru said, “God speaks best when He speaks the people’s language. As publishers we must understand the people’s language—using their realities, experience, and contexts. This translates not just into head language, but into changed lives.”

Nigeria’s Edysyl Publishers CEO Sylvester Ejeh, asked, “Where do we go from here to make sure converts are not lost?” He said business challenges are difficult and corruption hurts economic growth. Repackaging North American or Western European literature is good, and American suppliers give developing publishers and distributors wonderful terms, but, Ejeh said, “We must develop local authors who know what life is like in our culture.”

Price said, “We experience fellow believers being killed by individuals of a different religious persuasion. And, now, we are attempting to meet the social needs within that religious group. Most American and European churches have no idea what that experience is like.”

Waweru asked, “Why do we have HIV/AIDS issues? Corruption issues? It’s because the way the Gospel has been communicated has not allowed internalization.”

The challenge for the Church worldwide is recognizing these cultural differences in our literature and publishing and supporting a new class of writers and publishers who can best speak to local issues. The recent *Africa Bible Commentary* may be a lead publication in this. While it was developed in Africa, its distribution will not be limited to that continent, but allowed to speak to those of African heritage in Europe and America.

Global changes in Christianity are causing uncertainty at all levels of the spiritual experience. Jesus told us everyone who is born of the Spirit is like the wind, and doesn’t know where He comes from or where He’s going. Jesus also told us in the same passage, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

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ChristianTrade Association International

ChristianTrade sponsors international regional conventions, a directory of the Christian trade worldwide and encourages the formation of national Christian trade associations in its attempt to support the growth of the Christian trade worldwide. For more information, please contact Jim Powell at jp@CTAIntl.com. Or, visit the ChristianTrade website:

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