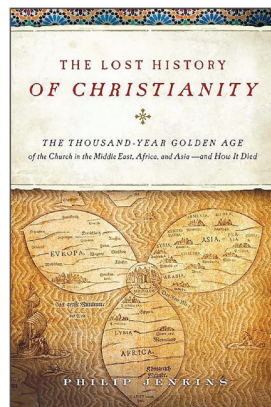


The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia—and How It Died

By Philip Jenkins. HarperOne, 2014.
315 pages.



Reviewed by Alex McKinnon

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Philip Jenkins, distinguished professor of history at Baylor University, provides a masterful overview of “a story that is radically unfamiliar to most Western readers.”

From its earliest days, Christianity spread throughout the empire, despite severe persecutions at the hands of imperial officials, who feared it as alien and subversive. Yet despite long sufferings and many martyrdoms, the new faith slowly won grudging toleration. Christians established influential churches and schools in great cities and communication hubs. Benefiting from the

empire's peace and stability, Christians spread along the protected trade routes, and used the familiar languages of the ruling elites. The ecclesiastical hierarchy closely mirrored the old imperial structure of cities and provinces, and when that empire faded away, the Christian church survived on its ruins. (49)

Jenkins is playing with our expectations. Writing to a Western audience familiar with Christianity's expansion throughout the Roman Empire, Jenkins expects his reader to be confused: this is the familiar story of Christian expansion; it is nothing new. However, the quote above does not describe the often-retold Westward expansion of Christianity into the Roman world, but the Eastward one. As Jenkins says, "the Eastern expansion faithfully mirrors that in the West" (49).

As we travel this mirror-journey East with Jenkins, we realise just how much of our Christian history we have lost through our collective forgetfulness. On a popular level at least, our history of Asian Christianity begins in the nineteenth century with Carey's pioneering work. For example, posted on the The Gospel Coalition's Instagram page is the comment that, "ever since William Carey, Western missionaries have recognized the challenge of overcoming cultural differences in their ministries" (Clark 2024). However, reliving this Eastward journey reveals just how ignorant we have become. Eastern churches filled with Asian Christians were overcoming cultural differences in the *sixth* and *seventh* centuries (9 – 11; 64 – 65).

The first and second chapters provide a fascinating overview of the vitality of early Eastern Christianity and its missionary endeavours. We are, for example, introduced to the important Nestorian school of thought and its leaders which makes it essential reading as we begin to reclaim our forgotten history. Chapters three and four deal with Eastern Christianity in Persian, Indian and Far-Eastern contexts. The beginning of the decline of Eastern Christianity due to Mongol invasions and the rise of Islam is dealt with between chapters five and eight. Jenkins outlines the final stages of the decline of Eastern Christianity and the rise of

the Ottoman Empire and later European colonial empires in the ninth chapter. Finally, chapter 10 reflects on this history with implications for the contemporary reader.

Reading this book addresses this collective forgetfulness and allows us a more complete Christian history. In this respect, *The Lost History of Christianity* is essential reading for any Christian unaware of their Asian heritage.

However, what might cross-cultural practitioners gain from reading this book? Some of us are privileged to live in lands where we stumble across the “ghosts” (173) of this early Christian presence through discoveries: old churches buried beneath mosques, for example. Allow me to briefly draw from this book five implications for the cross-cultural worker before concluding with a brief comment about Jenkins’ view of Islam.

1. Reconsidering the Nestorians

We suffer perhaps from using unfamiliar terms like *Nestorian*, so that the Eastern religious story seems to involve some obscure sect or alien religion rather than an extraordinarily vigorous branch of the Christian tradition. (46, emphasis in original)

In introducing us to our forgotten history, Jenkins seeks to affirm its *Christian-ness*. Has this history intentionally been forgotten due to an assumption that it is the history of heretics? The term *Nestorian* causes some to question the authenticity of these churches.

Jenkins encourages us to reconsider our attitude toward the Nestorians and provides good reasons: “all shared a faith in the Trinity, the Incarnation, baptism, adoration of the Cross, the holy Eucharist, the two Testaments; all believed in the resurrection of the dead, eternal life, the return of Christ in glory, and the last judgement” (ii). Rather than being a fringe view, Jenkins’ evaluation echoes the growing consensus that the Nestorian label is a “lamentable misnomer” (Brock 1996) for

a community of Christians who, in hindsight, fall within the bounds of orthodoxy (Sunquist et al. 2001, 596; Tennent 2010, 239).

Jenkins also notes that Protestants would do well to remember that the Nestorians exercised an influence over the church for a timespan “*far longer than the entire history of Protestantism to date*” (27, emphasis added). To simply ignore this history or consign it to an alien footnote in history is an irresponsible and implausible response.

Some argue that the theological deviance of these churches was the predominant reason for their demise. Again, Jenkins clearly repeats this theme throughout: “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 [Muslim] persecution” (100).

If we have been guilty of casting judgement over this branch of Christianity, *The Lost History* encourages a theological reconsideration. This ought not to be an uncritical endeavour, either in our acceptance or outright dismissal. If we are to humbly learn from these Christians through the history we have forgotten, we must first accept that we are part of the same family.

2. Local Theologizing

Some even ask whether this new global world Christianity will remain fully authentic, as European norms seem to represent a kind of gold standard. But such questions are ironic when we realize how unnatural the Euro-American emphasis is when seen against the broader background of Christian history. (3)

Having recognized how William Carey overcame cultural barriers in his ministry, The Gospel Coalition concludes that “contextualized theology – developed by indigenous leaders – is now seen as a crucial outcome of faithful missiology.” However, a final caution is cast: “as the global church grows outward in space, it shouldn’t outgrow what we’ve learned over time” (Clark 2024).

As inferred previously, the present-tense “now” of Clark’s quote should be disregarded as we reclaim our knowledge of the lost history of Christianity: William Carey was not the first proponent of contextualized theology. However, Clark’s final caution questions the authenticity of contextualized theologies. Again, we cannot be uncritical in the endeavour of contextualization, but those of us who are Western practitioners must refrain from subconsciously upholding the “gold standard” of European norms. Indeed, a predominant emphasis in this book is the acknowledgement that

through much of history, leading churches have successfully framed the Christian message in the context of non-Greek and non-European intellectual traditions, of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. That precedent is encouraging for modern intercultural enquirers. Far from being a daring innovation, the globalized character of modern Christianity is better seen as a resumption of an ancient reality. (39)

As a historical account, this book does not delve into the *how* of contextualization but rather the *when*. Western cross-cultural practitioners will benefit from acknowledging that contextualization has been part of our history from the beginning. Craig Ott carefully writes that Western theological formulations are

no less true in Africa or Asia than they are in Europe or America. However, they are not necessarily equally relevant, understandable, or adequate in all contexts. Nor are such formulations exhaustive. Here is where theological insights from non-Western perspectives hold so much promise. They open the door not necessarily for *alternative* but rather for *fuller* theological understanding. (Ott 2007, 315, emphasis in original)

As a worldwide church, we are dependent not only on one another, but also on those who have gone before us in history in order to fully understand the gospel.

3. Rootlessness

Christianity... has on several occasions been destroyed in regions where it once flourished. In most cases, the elimination has been so thorough as to obliterate any memory that Christians were ever there, so that today any Christian presence whatsoever in these parts is regarded as a kind of invasive species derived from the West. (2)

Reflecting on what it meant for her to turn to Christ in faith, an Iranian BMB mentioned that she “suffered” from guilt and feelings of rootlessness, asking herself, “Am I still Iranian?” (Rashidi 2023). By suggesting that “Iranian” and “Christian” need to be reconciled, she seeks to account for Iran’s Christian history, thus removing the sting from her question, “Am I still Iranian?”

Mostofi (2021) agrees with Rashidi and suggests that the Iranian church should incorporate teaching on its Christian heritage in discipleship initiatives (6). In Iran, this would mean learning from the Nestorian church who experienced rapid church growth and persecution similar to contemporary times.

For the cross-cultural practitioner serving in Asia, The Middle East, or North Africa, *The Lost History* is an excellent springboard from which we can launch into our local contexts. To encourage our local BMB friends, we can hone in on a section of history particularly relevant to the context in which we serve. In the context of the Arabian Peninsula, for example, “there is... a strong sense of national identity and... to be part of this nation is to be of this religion [i.e. Islam]” (BMB cited in Gendi 2015, 137). However, through uncovering the Christian history of the Arabian Peninsula, BMBs can be authentically *Khaleeji* (a native of the Gulf) while following Christ. The “social default” (Kraft 2014, Conclusion, para. 14) of *Khaleeji* being synonymous with Muslim can begin to be quietly questioned and subverted.

4. Modern Models from the Ancient World

Many aspects that we conceive as thoroughly modern were in fact the norm in the distant past: globalization, the encounter with other faiths, and the dilemmas of living under hostile regimes. (4)

Learning *about* the ancient Christians in the East means that we can learn *from* them. Operating beyond the Christian Empire of Rome, ancient Christianity looks surprisingly modern. For example, Merv, a metropolitan centre of early Eastern Christianity (located in modern day Turkmenistan), fits a contemporary Christian description outside of the West: “Christians living ... as tolerated minorities; ... a church in a multifaith society; and above all, of Asian Christians in a wholly non-European context” (46).

Our BMB friends can be empowered by looking back at their ancestors who lived in similar contexts and faced similar questions. They are not alone in their journey of following Christ in these contexts; the “great cloud of witnesses” includes those who have run before them on the very ground upon which they now walk.

Again, this should be a critical exercise, and we should avoid making simple parallels. Jenkins notes that “although subject to legal disadvantages, Timothy [a leading figure of the Church of the East] lived in a universe that was culturally and spiritually Christian but politically Muslim, and he coped quite comfortably with that situation” (16). Contemporary BMBs, however, are often living in a context which has become more “intensely *and* devoutly Muslim” (168). Therefore, the context in which they find themselves is culturally, spiritually and politically Muslim – a difference from Timothy’s day. Nevertheless, we have models and examples with which to work as we continue to learn about the ancient Christians of the Eastern churches.

5. Local Languages

Perhaps the real mystery of Christianity is not in explaining failure or eclipse at particular times, *but rather in accounting for the successes elsewhere*. (259, emphasis added)

While predominantly concerned with how Christianity died in the East, Jenkins does offer reflections on why Christianity *did not die* in other areas. In Chapter eight ("The Mystery of Survival"), the Egyptian Coptic Church is compared with the African Church of Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine. While the Coptic Church survives to this day, the traditional church of North Africa died without a trace. Jenkins explores this phenomenon and posits that "where the African church failed was in not carrying Christianity beyond the Romanized inhabitants of the cities and the great estates, and not sinking roots into the world of the native peoples" (229). A large part of this failure was a linguistic one:

The African church had made next to no progress in taking the faith to the villages and the neighbouring tribes, nor, critically, *had they tried to evangelize in local languages*. This would not have been an unrealistic expectation, in that already by the fourth century missionaries elsewhere were translating the scriptures into Gothic, and Hunnic languages. (229, emphasis added)

Examining the Egyptian parallel, Jenkins notes that "even when Coptic itself gave way to Arabic, Christianity was too thoroughly naturalized to vanish without a lengthy struggle. *Not all the disasters of the fourteenth century could eliminate this absolute association between Christianity and Egyptian-ness*" (231, emphasis added).

The conclusion is clear: evangelism and discipleship in local languages is of paramount importance. As cross-cultural practitioners, how much are we investing in our linguistic skills? How are we addressing the imbalance of

discipleship materials in local languages? How are we encouraging our local friends to create artistic responses to God in local art forms?

Islam

A brief conclusive comment is required to remark on Jenkins' attitude towards Islam. This is of particular importance due to the role that Islam played in both the daily life and the demise of the Church of the East.

It should be noted that Jenkins provides a balanced analysis of Islamic persecution towards Christianity throughout the book:

Anyone who believes that boundless aggression and ruthless tyranny over minorities are built into the DNA of Islam needs to explain the quite benevolent nature of Muslim rule during its first six centuries; but advocates of Islamic tolerance must work just as hard to account for the later years of the religion's historical experience.... if Muslim rulers were not all saints, neither were they the spawn of Satan. (31, 99)

This balance is a truly commendable feature of Jenkins' writing and is found across different subject areas in the book. However, it seems to be lost in the conclusion of the book where he questions, "might Christians someday accept that Islam fulfils a positive role, and that its growth in history represents another form of divine revelation, one that complements but does not replace the Christian message?" (258). This complementarianism is, by nature, a two-way street and therefore not simply an issue for Christians to accept; would the final revelation of Islam also relinquish itself to be "another form of divine revelation"?

This view of Islam is problematic to say the least, as is Jenkins' perception of Christianity's view of other religions in general. Using the Old Testament as an example, Jenkins writes that "throughout much of the Old Testament, outside peoples like the Assyrians and Babylonians feature chiefly for their relevance to the fate of Israel and serve as

walk-on characters only in that particular drama” (257). Jenkins, however, misses the thrust of the entire grand narrative of the biblical text:

The Old Testament is not content to leave the nations in the passive role of spectators of all that God was doing in Israel. The nations will come to see that God’s dealings with Israel were to be, for them, not just a matter of alternating admiration or horror. The whole story was *for their ultimate good*. Or, to pursue the metaphor of spectators, the whole drama was for the benefit of the audience. (Wright 2006, 474, emphasis in original)

Even as an audience, the other nations are the point and benefactors of the Christian drama. Despite not understanding this point, Jenkins does show us that the Christians of the East understood deeply the missional call of God to the nations around them. In reclaiming this lost history, we can learn from them as we continue to partner in God’s mission in the same contexts centuries later.

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