

# Luther and World Christianity

Colleagues,

Not long ago Philip Jenkins (Distinguished Professor of Religious Studies and History, Penn State University) startled some folks with his book *THE NEXT CHRISTENDOM* (Oxford University Press, 2003). Jenkins argued that “global” Christianity was “moving south” and that the “next” Christendom – already on the scene throughout the southern hemisphere – was quite different from, and would eventually supplant, the “standard model” found in Europe and North America. He proposed four theses.

1. Over the past half century the centre of gravity of the Christian world has moved decisively to the global South.
2. Within a few decades European and Euro-American Christians will have become a small fragment of world Christianity.
3. By that time Christianity in Europe and North America will to a large extent consist of Southern-derived immigrant communities.
4. Southern churches will fulfill neither the Liberation Dream nor the Conservative Dream of the North, but will seek their own solutions to their particular problems.

Not long ago missiologists in Europe asked for responses to Jenkins. I did so, but my essay didn't make the final cut to appear in the published papers coming later this year. So it winds up—divvied up—as this week's and next week's ThTh postings. ThTh 407 looks at the first two of Jenkins' four theses. Next week's ThTh 408 the last two.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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# ***TITLE: Philip Jenkins' Global Christianity Viewed through Luther's Lenses***

## ***INTRODUCTION.***

*In this essay I propose to sift Jenkins' four theses through the sieve of Martin Luther's mission theology. That proposal itself might strike some as strange, even some Lutherans, since the common wisdom among missiologists is that Luther had no mission theology. Maybe, maybe not. But he did have some specific things to say about Christendom, and about the Christian Gospel, and about that Gospel's moving to places where it had not been before. That approaches Jenkins' agenda.*

## ***PART I: CHRISTENDOM MOVING SOUTH***

*JENKINS' THESIS #1. Over the past half century the centre of gravity of the Christian world has moved decisively to the global South.*

*LUTHER: Some caveats about "Christendom, Global Christianity, the Christian world"*

*"Global Christianity, Christendom, the Christian world"—all three terms more or less synonyms—are the focus of Jenkins' reportage and projections. In academically-tinted missiology of both the southern and the northern hemispheres, one of the three, "Christendom," is almost a dirty word. It signals Constantine's mistake when the Christian faith became the official faith of the Roman (previously "pagan") empire. Mandated Christian faith is an oxymoron. Imperial organization of that faith in top-down hierarchy is also a self-contradiction. "Now" we know that. So any continuation, let alone expansion, of that sort of "Christendom" for the*

missiological academy is an absolute no-no.

[Whether that perspective in academe is also true at the grass roots of formerly “established” Christianity is not necessarily the case. In some places definitely not. Many voices in the USA yearn for “Christendom.” A Christian nation, Christian values, a Christianized social fabric—continues as an ideal devoutly sought by many, with costly political and promotional efforts to make it so. Some critics of the USA’s regime-change warfare policy in the Middle East detect a “Christendom” undertow there as well. Especially if the shibboleths accompanying the venture, “freedom, democracy, (yes, even capitalism)” et al. are claimed as Christian values.]

Luther’s critique of Christendom. The ambidextrous God of the Bible.

The very title of Jenkins’ book, *The Next Christendom*, would cause Luther to raise an eyebrow. He did not think that Christendom—surely not of his day, and unlikely in any other day—was a good thing. In his view Christendom is a nemesis to the Christian Gospel. By definition, he thought, the Gospel never leads to a “-dom” or “-ianity” of any sort. However one might define “Christian world, Christianity, Christendom,” Luther was skeptical of any proposal for establishing a Christian general culture, specifically if “the Gospel” was claimed as the cornerstone for it all. His own lived experience in culture-wide “Christian” Europe with its bi-polar ruling ellipse of the Roman Church in symbiosis—sometimes friendly, sometimes not so—with the Holy Roman Empire, had eventually convinced him that such an all-pervasive wall-to-wall Christian culture was at odds with the Gospel—at least in its Latin form in the Europe of his day. How so?

Although God is indeed one, Luther came to understand that

God's work in the world is not unitary, technically speaking not simplex, but duplex. Recompense and mercy—though patently divine operations—are not synonyms. Following Biblical patterns of God-talk, especially Isaiah & Jeremiah, Paul & John, and the Letter to the Hebrews, Luther came to see God at work in the world in ambidextrous fashion. God works with the left hand creating and sustaining creation—especially the stop-gap rules-and-regulations needed to preserve a sin-fractured world. God works with the right hand redeeming [literally, “regaining ownership of”] that same estranged creation with its now actively antagonistic human creatures, and bringing the whole business back “home” and thus back to its own health and wholeness, a.k.a. salvation and righteousness. Not an easy job, even for God. Whereas God's left-hand work —keeping the planets moving, the cycle of seasons on earth, the sunrise, the teeming oceans, the birds and bees, even the flow of human generations—seems effortless for God, the right-hand agenda was costly, very costly, costing God his own beloved Son to bring it to fruition.

For this right-handed work God's promissory covenant, at least as far back as Abraham (maybe even to Noah and Adam) in the Hebrew scriptures, fulfilled in the crucified and risen Messiah, was the foundational scriptural centerpiece. It was God's “Word” as Gospel. For the left hand, the Sinai covenant of old with its debit-credit “*sum cuique*” orderliness and God's on-going “law written in the heart . . . accusing and excusing” those who'd never heard of Sinai was the “other” divine word, Law, that animated it all. The medieval merger of an imperial church and a “holy” empire blended what God distinguished. Christendom contradicted the word and work of God. Yes, one and only one God, but from that same God, two distinctly different words, two differing covenants, two different “*diakoniai*” (agendas), constituting two different

creations—old and new. Same one Rex, but two different regimes, so sharply different that when confronting sinners, one constituted a death sentence, the other life that lasts.

That made any totalitarian worldly regimes, even and especially ones that called themselves “holy,” suspect. Since an ambidextrous deity was the operations manager, and since the one and only place where God’s two regimes intersected was at Christ’s crucifixion, in his body on a tree, any Christendom that claimed to unify those two disparate divine operations within itself was out of order. And Christendoms always seek to do that. Luther saw this “in spades” in both church and state—Holy Roman Church, Holy Roman Empire—of his day. Both went beyond their God-given jurisdictions in implementing God’s diverse regimes. The churchly institution divinely authorized for God’s right-hand work operated unashamedly within the left-hand realm, even applied left-hand coercive rubrics in its own proper churchly agenda, thus violating the non-coercive Gospel at the center of Christ’s own mandate: “coercive authority? It shall not be so among you.” And the holy Roman empire—from the emperor all the way down to the peasant level in its own secular hierarchy—merely with its claim to holiness, but even worse with its fingers constantly in God’s churchly right-hand agenda, was violating its authorization to be about the Father’s left-hand business.

So the model of Christendom that prevailed in the 16th century was abusive of the Gospel. Both institutions that constituted the Siamese twins of Medieval Christianity, Empire and Church, by virtue of putting their “hands” where they did not belong, were nemeses to God’s right-hand regime of getting sinners forgiven, getting them joined to Christ, and thus becoming the body of Christ, the core definition of what church is. Luther also observed that this confusion of jurisdictions was also the bane of God’s left-hand regime. When God’s appointed left-

handlers pursued church politics, they were shirking their duties in caring for the creation.

So is no “Christian society” possible? Well, that all depends. If/when secular authority sticks to its God-given agenda of God’s left-hand caring, preserving, equity-justice work, then you do have the matrix for a godly society, though not a “gospelly” society. When left-handers keep their hands off of soteriology, they are doing the right thing. A “Gospelly” society is what the body of Christ is. Right from the start that society has no political or geographical borders, so no one prince can possibly have authority there—by definition. The one and only authority of that body is Christ, the head. There are no secondary rulers in that regime, since every other participant is but a member. It is a very very flat hierarchy—one head, everybody else equal. And even that head is not situated above the members, exercising authority “over” his underlings, but is himself “beneath” them all, serving “and giving his life as a ransom for many.”

God’s right-hand regime—on earth just as incarnately as the left-hand regime—appears first of all on the divine-human interface (*coram deo*) where God’s mercy trumps God’s justice, new creation overtakes preservation, in short, right-hand trumps left-hand. Now comes stage two. From this “pebble” (see below) dropped into the pool of God’s left-handed world, the gospelly society called church is created, and from that pebble ripples emanate. God’s right-hand regime is replicated over and over again on the human-human interface where these mercy-managed (former) sinners now enact the very same agenda *coram ho minibus*, their face-to-face interactions with fellow humans. That is the paradigm. For more on this ripple-effect, see below.

But that does not constitute a Christendom. Godly left-handed

societies are what all societies are called to be, and in some cases to achieve, even with no reference to God's other "gospelly" right-hand agenda. From what Luther had heard of Suleiman the Magnificent, he thought that Suleiman was operating a godly left-hand regime among the "Turks." And there was no Christic Gospel in his regime. Luther excoriated Suleiman's murderous onslaught against the Holy Roman Empire to extend Islamic faith. That was, of course, an abomination—Suleiman invading soteriology, a violation of his God-given jurisdiction. His right-hand worked wickedly, but his left-hand —*mirabile dictu*—did not. If he had only stuck to that "secular" this-world calling, he would have been above reproach. Clearly no attempt at a Christendom, just a good, yes, Muslim, ruler exercising his godly vocation.

[The lands in which the Lutheran Reformation prevailed sought to organize public life and church life according to these rubrics. Some did better than others, e.g., electoral Saxony for a while. But here too sin did not cease to blur the edges. It was not a "separation of church and state," but an awareness that faith is a matter of the heart and thus inaccessible to any legislation or coercion, whilst rules and regulations, and coercion if needed, was proper—yes, god-given—in the body politic. Constantinian Christendom makes faith a "you gotta." In left-hand right-hand Lutheranism it was a "you get to, but you don't have to" be a Christ-confessor to be a legal citizen.]

Christendom in Luther's thought cannot escape authority conflicts—at the most fundamental level. Political authority, Caesar's rightful authority, is (the Latin word) *imperium*, Christ's authority is (also Latin) *dominium*. Here are the antitheses: authority over vs. authority under; you serve me vs. I serve you; When the crunch comes, you die to preserve my life vs. when the crunch comes, I die to preserve your life.

Political and social structures are patterned as imperium—and rightly so. The structure in the body of Christ is only dominium. To live in both at the same time—as all Christians do (but not-yet Christians don't)—brings tension. This tension is fundamental, because the differing divine regimes are at the base. This side of the parousia it is never totally resolved. But it is endurable, even victoriously so—because of the Gospel.

SUMMA: If southern Christians eschew a new Christendom as Christian “gravity” moves toward them, they may model a church/society pattern that northern Christians—so long as there still are some—never yet achieved. Luther could help them in the project.

## **PART 2: EURO-AMERICAN CHRISTIANS A MINORITY**

JENKINS' THESIS #2. Within a few decades European and Euro-American Christians will have become a small fragment of world Christianity.

LUTHER: Why be surprised? The Gospel is God's Platzregen, a thundershower. It moves to new fields when the old fields cease bearing fruit. As God's pebble dropped in a pool, its ripples keep moving. The pebble's impact persists.

A. Shrinkage in the North. Has the Gospel itself moved South?

Shrinkage in the north, luxuriant growth in the South? Luther might say: Why be surprised? But if that is so, there is a message there for the north: Physician, heal thyself. Platzregen and pebble dropped in a pool were images Luther used to talk about the Gospel. In his theology just what is “the Gospel?”

>From Luther's primal “Aha!”—actually a hermeneutical



breakthrough beginning with Scripture—about the difference (discrimen, in Latin) between God's law and God's gospel, about God's bi-vocal speech and bi-vocational work in the world, came his understanding of what the gospel was and was not. Gospel is God's own regime-change at God's interface with sinners. Gospel is the profound, yes startling, substance of the Kingdom of God in NT rhetoric. It is God's own switch, God's own regime-change, from left-hand "counting trespasses" to right-hand "your sins are forgiven." It unfolds initially as Christ befriends sinners, but then expands to God's entire fractured creation. That is what's really "Good" and really "New," for example, when St. Mark teases us with his opening words: "The Beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ the Son of God." When "Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the Gospel of God," THEN "the KoG was drawing near," THEN "the time was fulfilled." Jesus makes KoG happen. He enacts it. No Jesus, no KoG. So Luther understood the uniform witness of the New Testament. The KoG is the Gospel, Good News of God's own regime-change with sinners and the ripples that flow from that.

That was one of Luther's folksy pictures for the Gospel—and for its territorial expansion across the world. It is for him a mission metaphor. Not that missionaries bring the Gospel to places where it has not been, but that the Gospel itself is the power-pack. The Gospel is the power of God for salvation. It brings the missionaries to places where it hasn't been before. They don't "organize" to make it happen. The Gospel organizes them to make them witnesses. If the Gospel is indeed burgeoning in the southern hemisphere, it's not the missionaries who did it. It is the Gospel itself rippling its way south of the equator.

Luther, like New Testament witnesses, hypostasized the Gospel. It was for them a living entity. As the Word of God, yes, the FINAL Word of God, what else would you expect? Like all Words

of God, the Gospel is not print on a page, but a Voice speaking, breath in motion, sound reverberating. Luther's pebble image merely translates the airwaves into watery ones.

Another of Luther's favorites for the Gospel, also a moist metaphor, is "Platzregen." From the OT prophets (his main lecture turf at Wittenberg University) Luther was taken by references to a "drought of the Word of God" in Israel's worst times of distress, God's most severe affliction on his apostate people. That drought would only be broken when God, *sola gratia*, sent his "Platzregen," a surprise thunder shower, a cloudburst, to refresh his apostate people with mercy and forgiveness, and thus revive faith and the fruits thereof.

That applied all the more, thought Luther, to the fulfilled Gospel in Christ. It too (ala John 3) "comes and goes where it listeth," apart from human ingenuity or engineering. But its movement is not arbitrary. There is a rationale. When the soil on which it showers bears fruit, it stays. Precipitation persists. However, when no produce comes forth, when faith dies, no longer grasping the mercy offer, and faith's fruits do not follow, God moves it elsewhere. Just like a summer cloudburst it passes on to other fields, "and you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes."

If the Gospel is indeed inundating the southern hemisphere these days, its fruitful operations there, Luther would doubtless say, signal the opposite for the "old" fields of (formerly) Gospel-watered lands up north. Christian shrinkage up north and growth down south is not just social geography, it may also be theological geography.

B. Testing, testing, testing: Which gospel is burgeoning, which one shrinking? Remember the Remnant.

But the Gospel Platzregen cannot be verified by numbers.

Already in ancient days (OT and NT) the faithful were more often than not a “remnant.” The multitudes went for other gospels. Other Platzregens also existed—already within the first generation after Jesus’ departure. Many of the NT writings confront such other gospels, other gospels that drew large numbers. So a quality check is called for with every spurt in membership numbers. Jesus himself already alerted the disciples to other agents sowing seed into the soil where the Gospel also had been planted. And the other sowers had their Platzregens too to germinate and nurture their other-gospel plantings. Heresy and schism were first-generation realities in the history of the church.

Luther saw other gospels palpably present in the Europe of his day. The very church that he grew up in, that educated him, that ordained him, was itself afflicted with the bad seed of other gospels. Though baptism (except for Jews) was universal in the Holy Roman Empire, the empire was a mission field—his own dear Germany probably the foremost. A Pelagian “gene” had gotten into the gospel-seed that was sown, that was believed by the faithful, and a churchly institution had evolved whose practices aided and abetted that bad seed and the bad faith that it generated.

If there is a “center of gravity” (Jenkins’ term in the first thesis) for things Christian, it is not found in population statistics. It is located where the Gospel is. Determining just what the authentic gospel is and what “other” gospels are has been a constant agenda of the church’s life and history from the beginning.

Even in our time, with a century of ecumenical encounter and significant rapprochement, there is no consensus among Christ-confessors as to what is “the” and what is “other” gospel. Early on in Luther’s professorial life, his fellow Augustinian

monks asked him to tell them at their annual assembly (1518) in Heidelberg just what THE Gospel was that was generating the hubbub at Wittenberg. He framed his response by contrasting “theologia gloriae” with “theologia crucis” and offering that either/or for testing all proposed gospels. He’d borrowed the terms, he said, from Augustine and specifically from St. Paul’s own vocabulary in 1 Cor. 1. The widespread Pelagian-infected Gospel of the day wound up under the glory-theology rubric, and the Christ-alone, faith-alone Gospel (no surprise) came in under cross-theology. Lutherans still claim that this set of alternatives works for “testing the spirits”—and the gospels of our day. But not all are convinced.

Already in the second decade of the Reformation era the Wittenberg reformers applied this test in a grass-roots “visitation” of parishes throughout Saxony where many of their own graduates were parish pastors. And the results were horrendous. Both among parishioners and among pastors theologia gloriae was winning hands down. Luther grasped for stop-gap measures—a Small Catechism for household fathers, a Large Catechism for pastors—to cope with the catastrophic findings. The temptation was to legislate theologia crucis for the errant Saxons. But that would be fatal for sure, seizing upon theologia gloriae to guarantee theologia crucis—a patent oxymoron. In Saxony too, even Luther’s own “reformed” Saxony, theology of the cross was “remnant” theology.

SUMMA: Viewed through Lutheran lenses, the “move to the global south” may signal failure of faith in the global north. It may well be that the Platzregen has moved. Better said, that God has moved the Platzregen. However, before that can be verified, a “visitation” must be made—in the visual root meaning of the term “visit,” a “looking into” what gospel(s) is(are) raining in the south. Numbers don’t verify anything in such visitations. It takes quality control. And not all will agree

what yardstick should be used to quality-check the specimens. Luther proposed the glory/cross test for the Gospel. One of his colleagues, Melanchthon, reworded that test into a more pragmatic double question: Are the merits and benefits of Christ actually being “used” and offered to the people, or are they being wasted? Are the people actually receiving the grace and comfort that God-in-Christ wants them to have, or are they worse off than they were before? We will attempt to use this test on southern samples of Gospel below.

[To be continued in next week’s ThTh 408.]