

Book Review: The Lost History of Christianity

By Jeff Marlowe

In the midst of persecution, the 16th-century reformer Theodore Beza once urged a foe to "remember that the Church is an anvil that has worn out many a hammer." In his latest work, entitled *The Lost History of Christianity*, Philip Jenkins traces the thousand-year golden age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Westerners are often unaware of the existence and the spread of Eastern Christianity and the influence of the non-Western churches from 400 to 1400 A.D. The story is non-triumphalist, a bittersweet contrast to what happened in Europe and Byzantium during that same period when church and state were integrated.

Jenkins traces the history of Christianity from Africa to the Arab world to the heart of Asia. Despite its eventual demise in the 14th and 15th centuries, Eastern Christianity thrived for hundreds of years and was noted for its spiritual and cultural centers in places such as Baghdad, Samarkand, Damascus, Antioch, Addis Ababa, Azerbaijan, eastern China, Persia, Japan, and India. Christianity operated beyond the reach of Roman and Byzantine power, drawing benefits for groups who were condemned by the political and religious monolith of the empire. Once free of Roman and Byzantine oversight, Christian leaders were free to establish their own churches, often well-contextualized and conducted in local languages. The churches existed for more than 1,000 years, practicing an intentional mission to other cultures further east and south, establishing bishoprics, planting churches, and creating theological institutes. A vibrant liturgy and monasticism reigned for hundreds of years.

In stark contrast to Europe, the historical "norm" for many Westerners today, Christianity in the East was never a majority religion. There was no "Christendom" in the East. As a result, the churches were obligated to exercise wisdom and prudence in their relationship with political powers. Although treated favorably at times, the churches were always aware that their situation could change with the winds of political power. Whether intentional or imposed, the churches saw themselves as pilgrims. As a minority religion, Christianity lived side by side with Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Christian leaders knew the books of the other religions and were in continual dialogue. Because of their knowledge of other faiths, Christians were respected by the other religious groups, at times even consulted. Of course this phenomenon changed with the predominance of Islam and the systematic persecution that ensued in the 13th century.

The Lost History of Christianity shows that we have much to learn from the experience of the Eastern churches. First, Jenkins underscores the precariousness of building alliances with civil authorities. Although at times the Eastern churches needed to take advantage of their protection, for the most part the churches held their rulers at arm's length. Consequently, Christians in the East were never identified with ruling powers, distinguishing themselves from Rome and Byzantium, whose missionaries were considered agents of the empire.

Secondly, because the churches of Asia, the Middle East, and Africa were not constrained by the dictates of Rome and Byzantium, they were able to freely contextualize in a variety of ways in areas such as worship, hierarchy, and evangelism. The churches adopted the language of the culture, adapted customs and traditions, used local architecture and music, and never became a "parallel culture." *The Lost History of Christianity* demonstrates the importance of contextualization. Jenkins contrasts how the Copts of Egypt maintained their existence even to this day, while the Roman churches of north Africa disappeared. The Copts reached the inhabitants of the countryside in the language of the people, whereas the north African churches reached the Latin urban dwellers in the language of Europe and in the cultural centers of Latin culture. When cities, the target of invaders, were destroyed, the Christians of north Africa were killed or forced to flee. Conversely, the Coptic church was well assimilated culturally in the hearts and minds of the villagers of upper Egypt when devastation hit the cities or altered the political landscape.

Lastly, the Eastern churches modeled dialogue, not just with other religions they lived alongside, but with the reigning culture. The Christian leaders of the day were careful to know the culture, the literature, the heroes, and the worldview—there was a sense of belonging. Consequently, Christians were often given voice in important matters.

The fall of many of the Eastern churches to a mere remnant is complicated. One factor was an ever-growing reaction by Muslim rulers to the Crusades, which provoked widespread persecution. In addition, throughout the thousand years, a growing intolerance of minorities (Jews as well as Christians) by foreign invaders who were not necessarily motivated by religion added to persecution. Finally, climate change from the 11th to the 13th centuries caused global upheaval and massive shifts of populations, further adding to resentment of new people groups, of which Christians were one.

The churches of Africa, the Middle East, and Asia have suffered and, for a season, have been lost. But the God of the Scriptures is not yet finished. He tears down, yet He rebuilds. Our prayer is that these churches will continue to reappear, building on the labors of those thousand years.

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