

Is God returning to Europe?

by Eric Kaufmann

A leading US Christian says that faith in Europe will be re-energised by a creative Christian minority and by the example of Islam. But he is too sanguine about the integration of Muslims and about "model" America--where religiosity is, in part, a function of white ethnic anxiety

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God's Continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe's Religious Crisis, by Philip Jenkins

OUP, £16.99

This is the third volume in Philip Jenkins's acclaimed trilogy on the future of Christianity. The two previous works projected an optimistic vision of resurgent global Christianity, with its motor in the developing world, particularly sub-Saharan Africa. Jenkins's new book is about Christianity's encounter with the challenges of Islam and secularism in its European heartland.

Is Christianity dying in Europe? It seems so, with emptying pews, greying congregations and a plunge in the numbers studying for the priesthood. Meanwhile, Islam seems to be surging ahead, leading to a spate of apocalyptic books about "Eurabia" with titles like *While Europe Slept*. But Jenkins counsels optimism. As an American academic historian with a clear Catholic-Christian commitment, he forms part of a small but important voice within the halls of American higher education (which in turn informs a much larger centrist-conservative formation on the US intellectual landscape).

Jenkins's optimism is based on the idea that Europe's remaining Christians are transforming themselves into a "creative minority" whose spiritual commitment is stronger than that of previous generations. As evidence, he cites the rising popularity of pilgrimage to European religious shrines like Santiago de Compostela. Many pilgrims are younger people, as are those who make up the rapidly growing ranks of European evangelical Christianity. Jenkins shows that Europe's evangelicals, charismatics and Pentecostals are twice as large a force as Europe's Muslims, and have a parallel growth rate. There is also the boost provided by Afro-Caribbean, Filipino, Latin American and other Christian immigrants, who bring a vibrant new spirit to the religion. Though the white majority is only marginally involved in them, these movements may help to evangelise Europe's lapsed Christians, many of whom still profess supernatural beliefs, thereby "believing without belonging." In short, although Europe's future may be increasingly nonwhite, Christianity's future in its heartland will burn bright.

Jenkins spares no detail in the story of Islam's recent clashes with Europe, such as those over blasphemy laws, gay rights, women's rights and foreign policy. Oddly, the pattern of his analysis is to raise the alarm by pointing up the most disturbing trends, and then to look for the silver lining. For example, he begins his chapter on Europe's Muslims with figures on their rapid growth: "if Muslim numbers quad-rupled in that short [1970-2000] period, could they balloon just as impressively in coming decades?" On terrorism, he warns that groups like ETA and the IRA required few recruits to inflict immense damage. Their activists often numbered fewer than a thousand, but today, in Britain alone, 1,600 suspected Islamic militants are under surveillance while the penumbra of sympathisers is much wider. "The mystery is not so much why Europe has been the setting for repeated terrorist violence, but why so little of it has occurred to date." Jenkins predicts an Islamic assault on a holy Christian site like St Paul's or the Cathedral of Notre Dame in the next few years.

Then he switches tack: European Islam may be surging, but this is partly an optical illusion caused by the lack of mosque floor space causing worshippers to spill out on to neighbouring streets. A significant minority of Muslims may approve of terrorist acts or be attracted to puritanical forms of Islam, but "in the longer term, the underlying pressures making for accommodation and tolerance will prove hard to resist."

Jenkins argues that Europe has weathered storms of similar magnitude before, as with PLO terrorism in the early 1970s or Algerian terrorism in France in the mid-1990s. Moreover, Muslim birth rates will converge with those of non-Muslims, and we will see assimilation, along the lines of what happened in the US with European Catholic immigrants in the early 20th century, or Hispanic immigrants in the 21st. All that is required is respect for Islam (including protections against blasphemy), and a new, more inclusive and inspiring concept of national identity. The most counterproductive strategy is to insist, as the Dutch and French seem to be doing, upon conformity to an ethos of secular individualism, extending to the forced approval of homosexuality and artistic licence.

Here, Jenkins claims, Europe can take a page from the notebook of the US, where religion and moral issues have not been driven from the public conversation and national identity is defined through trans-ethnic symbols like the flag and constitution. As a result, American Muslims feel more comfortable than their European equivalents, and have never made mischief. On the other hand, accommodation must be two-way: immigrants must be encouraged to integrate, and the state should not grant legitimacy to narrow, conservative sections of the Muslim community. European elites would also be wise to listen to their voters and politely reject Turkish and Moroccan membership of the EU; these countries' demographic weight and cultural differences would dramatically alter the ethos and nature of Europe.

Should Europe take this path, argues Jenkins, it can incubate a new form of Islam which is flexible and liberal, yet retains its doctrinal core. This Euro-Islam can be re-exported back to modernise the homelands of Islam. In turn, Islam can help to sharpen lapsed Christians' awareness of their own heritage and revitalise the "pallid" Christianity of mainline churches. Europeans can also learn from Muslims to distance themselves from their "idolatry" of the nation state, and rediscover Christian values which both "precede and outlast states." Christianity's history is marked by death and resurrection, and Jenkins heralds the dawn of a period of intense reflection which may result in a revival on the scale of that which gripped Europe and America in the early 19th century after the Enlightenment "trough" of religion in the 1790s.

Jenkins's critique is aimed at secular liberals and conservatives, both of whom he claims overstate the scale of, and threat

posed by, the growth of Islam. But his reassurances are not rooted in solid data and betray an ignorance of the sociology of Muslim integration. The CIA Factbook and World Christian Encyclopedia provide guesses about the growth of the Muslim population which Jenkins uncritically accepts. More problematic is his assertion that Muslims will ultimately assimilate. Jenkins provides no indicators of Muslim integration, such as intermarriage rates or residential dispersion. A closer look at the data shows that European Muslims are diverging from other immigrant groups, like Afro-Caribbeans or non-Muslim Asians. The latter manifest high rates of intermarriage, residential desegregation and secularisation, while Muslims are retaining their ethnic and religious boundaries into the second generation. European Muslims are not American Hispanics.

Though a book about Europe, *God's Continent* is almost as interesting for what it reveals about the self-consciousness of America in an age of cultural conflict. European thinkers, led by those on the centre-left, increasingly define their societies as the antithesis of a globally irresponsible, anti-intellectual US. The American riposte, coming from both conservatives and centrists, is to point to Europe's abdication of geopolitical responsibility and its appeasement of political Islam. Both views have an element of truth as well as a strong dose of caricature, but beneath the American viewpoint lie deeper currents of cultural anxiety related to questions of race, religion and national identity.

In the past three decades, the US has experienced a more rapid change in its ethnic composition than at any period since the turn of the 20th century. Hispanics, a tiny minority of 1 or 2 per cent in 1960, now form 14 per cent of the population, a flow nourished mainly by illegal immigrants from across the US's southern border. Together with Asians, the new flow has reduced the US white population from 90 to 70 per cent in four decades, and will push it below 50 per cent by 2050. Past periods of rapid ethnic change have led to majority group assertion, but this time, the migration has occurred during a period of unprecedented multicultural liberalism, with "politically correct" attitudes at their sharpest on issues of race and immigration.

It seems that, barred from channelling their conservatism in an ethno-nationalist direction, American conservative thinkers have increasingly turned to religious and moral themes. The war on terror has served as a source of glue in an ethnically decentred nation. Though it has brought pain and loss, the clash with political Islam has reinvigorated America's sense of universal mission, which seemed precarious after the end of the cold war. Fears of ethnic change have been kept at bay through an optimistic, "missionary" effort to export the liberal-democratic US creed. This mission's primary audience is domestic, not international. Its aim is to preoccupy a culturally insecure majority population with a forward-looking project so as to deflect the desire to return to the more homogeneous America which it so vividly recalls. This has worked, with a new national narrative contrasting the honest and patriotic illegal Hispanic immigrant with the dangerous Islamic terrorist.

Looking at Europe, American thinkers of the centre-left and right experience a mixture of emotions. Envy, at Europe's relative homogeneity and economic equality, which reminds them of their American childhood; and irritation, at Europe's secular, snickering contempt for American enthusiasms like Christian evangelism and liberal-democratic proselytisation. Some argue, however, that a melting-pot Europe will come to resemble America in its diversity, inequality and missionary brand of nationalism. Europe's masses, who have a deep hunger for religion and moral concerns, will eventually prevail over the secular European elites who have ignored them for so long.

Philip Jenkins is too sophisticated fully to fall for this trope. Even so, the new centrist-conservative narrative is uncomfortably close to the surface of much of Jenkins' story, and there is too much emphasis on America as a model. In

reality, the US is as gripped by cultural conflict as Europe, and its majority worries deeply about the loss of its Anglo-Protestant culture and European ethnic predominance. Europe's Muslims are harder to integrate because they come from poorer source regions and cannot claim the "white" status of American Muslims, who arrive in a social hierarchy defined by black and Hispanic bottom rungs. Jenkins does make some valid points: Europe's elites have tried to slip Europeanisation past their publics and do not always acknowledge the demands of the masses. On the other hand, the same could be said for an American elite which, as Michael Lind has noted, favours globalisation, cuts in social security and mass immigration despite the wishes of the American majority for a more stable, protected "European"-style society.

Religious impulses do exist among Europeans, but there is little appetite for religion to play more than a symbolic public role. In the near term, the growth of Islam is less likely to renew Christianity, as Jenkins argues, than to reinvigorate secular nationalism which may--in the manner of France and the Netherlands--push religion more firmly into the private sphere. Christianity's revival in Europe is far from assured, but if it does happen it will be decided more by demography than the spiritual awakening of a committed minority.

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