

## ***God's Continent* by Philip Jenkins: A Summary**

With dramatically falling church attendance, baptisms, church weddings and a dangerously low birth rate many scholars in recent years have proclaimed that European Christianity is on the brink of death. Meanwhile, Europe's dechristianization has coincided with the explosive growth of other religions of a more traditionalist or fundamentalist bent, especially Islam. As mosques sprout up, journalists and other authors have begun to claim that Europe is being Islamicized. Just three years ago, Bernard Lewis, a widely respected American scholar of Middle Eastern history, famously observed that "Current trends show Europe will have a Moslem majority by the end of the twenty-first century at the latest....Europe will be part of the Arab west – the Maghreb."

In his latest tome, *God's Continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe's Religious Crisis*, Philip Jenkins offers a more optimistic account of the future of European culture. Jenkins argues that the death of European Christianity has been greatly exaggerated by those on the right and the left. Contrary to the opinion of some, Europe is not on the verge of becoming "Eurabia." Despite the challenges posed to European Christianity by secularization and the resurgence of Islam, Europe remains "God's Continent," and not only will Christianity survive, it will flourish.

Jenkins willingly acknowledges that European Christianity in its institutional form is quite sick and perhaps terminally ill when compared with Christianity in the Global South and the United States. In terms of specific traditional Christian doctrines such as heaven and hell, surveys have traced a sharp decline in belief. However, as Jenkins notes, institutional weakness is not necessarily the same thing as total religious

apathy. Religious belief is still a powerful force among “old stock Europeans.” Jenkins adopts Gracie Davie’s argument that “falling levels of observance and church attendance cannot simply be equated with pure secularism, suggesting instead that people are believing without belonging.”

Jenkins documents the surge of formal religious activity among Christians even in the most secular regions of Europe. For example, the increasing popularity of religious pilgrimages and the growth of immigrant churches among Africans, east Asians and Latin Americans in Europe are two indicators that Christianity is not dead yet. Unfortunately these positive indicators slip by the European media which Jenkins describes as being “overwhelmingly secular and generally hostile to organized religion.” Thus, assessing the European religious climate will always remain a challenge until the secularized media begins to pay attention to religious trends.

With fifteen million Muslims living in western Europe, Jenkins addresses the crucial question of whether Islam will successfully adapt to European culture as it has in other societies. Islam, like historic Christian churches, faces immense pressures from secularism. According to Peter Berger, instead of fading away both Christianity and Islam have adapted to Eurosecularity and will continue to adapt. Full of optimism, Jenkins asserts that Europe could “become the birthplace of a liberalized and modernized Islam that could in turn influence the religion worldwide.”

Although sections of European Islam have recently acquired a strongly militant and politicized character, Jenkins contends that this new Islamist extremism is only temporary. The religious situation in Europe is much more complex than many are willing to admit. In the short run, fears about secularization and changing social values

fuels Islamist extremism. However, the longer Muslims live in Europe and experience its powerful cultural trends, the more likely they will adapt and adopt popular European attitudes toward gender and sexuality.

European societies will continue to see more cultural and political encounters between religious belief and secularism. Old-stock Europeans will either drift more towards secularism or with the presence of Islam a multi-faith European society could inspire a reevaluation of Christian identity. Through contact with Muslims, Jenkins claims that Christians will take a closer look at Islam and find much that is familiar and inspiring. However, bridges will only be built between the two groups if Christians first take Muslim political grievances seriously. This includes acknowledging the abuses inflicted by Israel on her neighbors. Jenkins suggests that interaction between the two groups will bear much fruit. Muslims will learn the value of pluralism and Christians will recognize that the absolute separation between religion and state causes many problems. Muslims will reassess their relationship with modernity while Christians will reexamine their faith and its appropriate role in the public square. As a result, Jenkins concludes, religion will play a very important role in the public life of “God’s Continent” and Christianity will remain the majority faith in Europe for the foreseeable future.