

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

The Lost History of Christianity

by

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THE END OF GLOBAL CHRISTIANITY

1. When you think about the history of Christianity, what images come to mind? Why do you think of specific figures, languages, geographical locations, and so on, and not others?
2. “The particular shape of Christianity with which we are familiar,” writes Philip Jenkins, “is a radical departure from what was for well over a millennium the historical norm: another, earlier global Christianity once existed. For most of its history, Christianity was a tricontinental religion, . . . and this was true into the fourteenth

century” (p. 3). Before reading this chapter, how aware were you of this “earlier global Christianity”?

3. Review maps 1.2 and 1.3 on pages 21 and 23, respectively. What does each map communicate about Christianity? How does geographical presentation shape one’s perception? What theological implications result from different geographical presentations?

CHURCHES OF THE EAST

1. “For most nonexperts,” Jenkins writes, “Christian history after the earliest centuries usually conjures up images of Europe. We think of the world of Charlemagne and the Venerable Bede, of Thomas Aquinas and Francis of Assisi, a landscape of Gothic cathedrals and romantic abbeys” (p. 46). How does this chapter challenge these images as normative representations of Christianity during this time?
2. Review the section under the heading “Lost Kingdoms” on pages 54–56. How does the fact that “we must look beyond the borders of Rome to find the world’s earliest Christian states” strike you? How does it make you reconsider the way you understand the development of Christianity?
3. According to this chapter, what is lost when the history of Christianity in the East is forgotten? How does this forgetfulness impact Christians living today?

ANOTHER WORLD

1. Jenkins notes that “long after the coming of Islam, rich Christian cultures continued to develop and flourish across the Near East and Asia, with their own distinct literature, art, liturgy, devotion, and philosophy, and these cultures often recall the earliest Christian ages” (p. 71). Which aspects of these “rich Christian cultures” do you find most intriguing? Which aspects would contemporary Christians do well to incorporate into their beliefs or practices?
2. Jenkins describes the deep commitment of Eastern churches to learning and scholarship in local languages: “Syriac Christians produced scholars and thinkers . . . who shaped the emerging world of Islamic science and philosophy” (p. 78). Are you surprised by this statement? Why or why not?
3. “The more we look at the world of [early Eastern Christians],” Jenkins suggests, “the more despairing we should feel, in contrast, about any modern effort to ‘get back to the world of the New Testament,’ to restore the values or character of apostolic times” (p. 83). Why does Jenkins make this claim? What is it about Eastern Christianity that complicates this impulse to “get back to the world of the New Testament”?

THE GREAT TRIBULATION

1. The year 1354 brought particularly intense persecution of Christians in Egypt and the Middle East. “So disastrous, in fact, were the cumulative blows against the churches in these years that we can properly see the fourteenth century as marking the decisive collapse of Christianity in the Middle East, across Asia, and in much of Africa” (p. 98). Before reading this chapter, had you heard about this “decisive collapse”? Why or why not?
2. “The chronology of Christian sufferings under Islam closely mirrors that of Jews in Christian states” (p. 135). How does this comparison with Jews during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries help illuminate the challenges faced by Christians during this time?
3. During the height of persecutions against Christians in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, believers “were forced to exercise ever-greater discretion in their daily lives, seeking to avoid any possible acts of provocation, and living in constant fear of violence” (p. 137). How did living under such conditions change the nature of Christianity in these regions?

THE LAST CHRISTIANS

1. Jenkins suggests that the decline of Christianity in the Near East took place in “two distinct ‘falls’”: the first occurring during the Middle Ages and the second in

the early twentieth century (p. 141). Think about recent events, such as the Syrian civil war; could they be interpreted as a possible third phase of this decline?

2. “Arab Christians complain that their existence has been largely forgotten in the West, especially by those evangelicals who pledge uncritical support for ‘Christian Zionism’” (p. 167). Why do Western evangelicals—as well as other Western Christians—often identify more deeply with Israeli Jews than with Arab Christians? What does this identification say about Western perceptions of Eastern Christianity?
3. “Millions of [Middle Eastern Christians] will also continue the tradition elsewhere. For practical purposes, however, Middle Eastern Christianity has, within living memory, all but disappeared as a living force” (p. 172). As we mourn this disappearance of Christianity from the land of its birth, how could your own faith community welcome and learn from the displaced Christians who arrive in your neighborhood?

GHOSTS OF A FAITH

1. “Religions that endure build upon the ruins of their predecessors” (p. 173). Jenkins offers a few examples of this reality (for example, the cathedral in Mexico City is built on top of Aztec ruins). What other examples come to mind for you?
2. “German scholar Christoph Luxenberg suggests that the Quran is a confused translation from earlier Syriac

Christian texts, at a time when Syriac was the lingua franca of the Middle East” (p. 186). What do you make of Luxenberg’s claim here? What is at stake in his theory for Muslims and Christians alike?

3. According to Jenkins, mosque architecture was designed to recall the Byzantine Christian churches of the sixth and seventh centuries (p. 192). Does learning about the Christian roots of Muslim religious architecture affect the way you view these spaces? Why or why not?

HOW FAITHS DIE

1. “Based on the experiences of Christianity through history, we must stress the primary role of the state in the elimination of churches and communities” (p. 209). How has an affiliation with political power helped Christianity over the course of its history? How has this same affiliation hurt Christianity?
2. Jenkins points to demographic factors, such as birth-rate, that affect the “rise and fall” of religions. Can you think of other demographic factors that might be influencing religions today?
3. “Worldly success was a potent force in the growth of Islam, and in the shriveling of Christianity. That fact may be troubling to Christians, whose faith so often extols the triumph of the meek and humble while rejecting worldly success” (p. 223). Do you agree with Jenkins’s claim here? What is the connection between a

religion's posture toward "worldly success" and that religion's ability to flourish?

THE MYSTERY OF SURVIVAL

1. On pages 228–232, Jenkins compares the fates of Christianity in two regions—Egypt and North Africa (Algeria, Tunisia, and so on)—that “in different ways had been critical to the development of the early church” (p. 228). What did you learn from this comparison about why some religious groups survive and others disappear?
2. “Churches often make the mistake of imitating what seems at the time to be the natural and inevitable shape of secular society” (p. 243). In what ways might the American church of today be imitating secular society in ways harmful to the long-term flourishing of the faith?
3. For Jenkins, failure “is also likely when churches find virtually all their members among one particular ethnic or linguistic group while neglecting others. Christianity then becomes a badge of class or race rather than an open invitation to the whole society. . . . Conversely, churches succeed when they reach broadly across sections of society and make their religion part of the ordinary lived reality of a diverse range of communities” (p. 244). How would you describe your faith community in light of the preceding quote? How might you help your faith community do a better job of reaching “across sections of society”?

4. “Too little adaptation means irrelevance; too much leads to assimilation and, often, disappearance” (p. 245). What would it look like for churches today to strike this balance? Can you think of specific churches that are currently doing so?

ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS

1. “If in fact the religion is true, if God intends his church to carry a message to the utmost ends of the earth, why would he ever allow that church to die? Is God silent, or non-existent?” (p. 248). Have you ever asked these questions? How have you personally answered them?
2. “If Islam is not understood as the scourge that God applies to faithless Christians—and nor is it, as Muslims believe, the only true faith—then how exactly should it be seen? Might Christians someday accept that Islam fulfills 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?” (p. 258). Could your faith community ever come to see Islam in this way?
3. “Losing the ancient churches is one thing, but losing their memory and experience so utterly is a disaster scarcely less damaging” (p. 262). How has reading this book changed how you view the history of Christianity? How will you practice your faith differently because of what you have learned?