

The Coming Storm

Preparing for the Challenges of Post-Christian America

by Craig Smith

Recently, the forecast for Christianity in the U.S. has been a bit dreary. Failings by high-profile Christian leaders, political moves that appear hostile and depressing statistics about the declining practical significance of Christianity - even among professing believers - all combine to make the future of the faith here seem a bit sketchy. Sober reflection on these facts requires the conclusion that the coming years may prove more difficult for followers of Jesus than have previous decades.

However, looking at what's going on through a biblical and historical lens also gives us cause to hope...and perhaps even to look forward to the possibility of coming storms with something like anticipation. The truth is that an informed understanding of our own history will help us respond in ways that allow us to advance the cause of Christ and not merely stand our ground.

The front cover of *Newsweek* this week (April 13, 2009) announced "The Decline and Fall of Christian America." Based on the findings reported in the *2009 American Religious Identification Survey*, the story made this potentially alarming point: "While we remain a nation decisively shaped by religious faith, our politics and our culture are, in the main, less influenced by movements and arguments of an explicitly Christian character than they were even five years ago."¹ This is not to say that Christianity *in* America is dead, but that Christianity has less impact on the shape and character of the nation than at any other time in our history.

For myself, I am not overly concerned with how much America as a nation is overtly Christian. It seems to me that a nation can never really be Christian in the most important sense. The citizens or rulers who make up a nation may be Christian (or not) and consequently the laws they enact and the aims they pursue may be in line with Christian faith (or not), but a nation itself can never really be Christian or non-Christian. These are categories that can only be applied to the citizens of the nation and America has always embraced a religious diversity among its citizenry. In that sense, America-the-nation is no less Christian today than it has ever been at any time in its past.

However, it would appear that Christianity *in* America is having less and less impact *on* America, and this radically affects the degree to which our culture as a whole pursues laws and purposes which are consistent with Christian faith. According to the *2009 American Religious Identification Survey*, one third of Americans claim to be "born-again" Christians, but even among that group, there is a sharp decline in those who believe that their faith ought to determine their behavior or their decision-making in any meaningful way. This is alarming.

Recognition that Christians in America are less involved in our culture as active representatives of Jesus Christ naturally raises questions about the future of our faith here. While alarmist cries that Christianity will soon be outlawed in America are probably an

¹ Jon Meacham, "The End of Christian America," *Newsweek*, April 13, 2009, p. 34.

overreaction, recent political developments hardly serve to calm such fears. While I think this is an unlikely outcome, at least in the near future, it cannot be dismissed as an impossibility.

I have just finished reading Philip Jenkins' book, *The Lost History of Christianity*, in which he details a history of the Christian faith that would be surprising to most believers today. We often associate Christianity with western civilization, as though it was only in the western, European world that Christian faith took root and flowered. However, this view simply ignores the facts: at least until the 14th century, Christianity flourished in Asia (including the Middle East) and in Africa. If anything, Christianity was more deeply entrenched in the East than in the West. By 1000 A.D., the Christian populations of both the East and the West were roughly the same, but most European Christians were only first or second-generation believers while in Asia and Africa, many Christians could trace their faith-roots back for 25 or 30 generations.² Long before Christianity made significant inroads in western Europe, it was a vital part of the cultural fabric of large swaths of India and China, extending even to the remote lands of Nepal, Thailand and Japan.

Most American Christians will be surprised to learn this, and for good reason: today, Christianity is virtually non-existent in those lands, except in those areas where modern missionaries minister. We tend to think of these missionaries as breaking new ground when in fact they are often re-sowing seed on ground that once produced a rich harvest.

How did this happen? How could Christianity have lost its place in those cultures? And, if it could happen there, could it happen here in America, too? Are we even now heading down that road?

Perhaps...but perhaps not. The rise and fall of Christianity in the East is complex, of course, but there are several general observations which may help us chart a course for the next decade or so:

- 1. First, one of the most significant factors in the disappearance of Christianity from an area is the military defeat of a state that granted the church there freedom to worship and to evangelize.** Imagine what would happen to Christianity here in America if we were to be conquered by a radical Islamic nation. Christian faith and practice would probably be outlawed and quickly disappear. This is precisely what happened in places like the Middle East, Japan, India, etc. There is no guarantee, of course, that a conquering nation will restrict the freedom of Christians, but neither is there a guarantee that they will not. At present, Christians in America enjoy remarkable freedom. Would that freedom be likely to continue if we were defeated by a foreign nation? This doesn't mean that Christians should favor an aggressive military agenda, but it does mean that Christians should support a strong American military that can defend the liberties we currently possess.
- 2. Second, there is a strong correlation between the survival of Christianity in an area and the degree to which Christians there possessed political influence or power.** When the state is in the hands of those who wish to re-shape the culture so that it institutionalizes their beliefs and practices, lack of political influence may prove fatal to those whose beliefs and practices are different.³ For instance, when those in power favor legalizing abortion, they will do so unless Christians who oppose abortion have enough political influence to block this move. Once it is

² Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity* (New York: Harper One, 2008), p.70.

³ Jenkins, *Lost History*, 209.

institutionalized, those who continue to oppose it are increasingly seen as hostile dissenters. New restrictions are enacted to protect the state from this hostile presence and, in extreme cases, it may be determined that these “hostiles” must be removed by force. It has happened before and it will happen again.

This doesn't necessarily mean that Christians must be in *control* of the government, but it does mean that Christians cannot be *absent* from the political process, either as voters or as politicians. We don't necessarily have to be the most powerful, but we dare not be powerless. There is a widespread belief that an authentic Christian cannot get elected to an influential position without serious compromise. This may or may not be true - I tend to think that it is not, though this might be naïve - but it is certainly a premature surrender that we cannot afford to make.

- 3. Third, the eradication of Christianity in an area is often related to the perception that Christians in those areas are allies of the state's enemies.** During the Crusades, hundreds of thousands of Christians in Palestine and the Middle East generally were slaughtered by Muslim rulers who thought that, as Christians, they would be supporters of the invading European, “Christian” armies. Interestingly, up until that time, Christianity appears to have existed in Islamic lands with relatively little hardship. They were marginalized at times and persecuted at others, but they were not generally considered a threat and so were largely left alone. During the Crusades, however, this all changed and they were brutally exterminated. Why? Because the rulers of the state perceived them as being aligned with their enemies. I'm not sure there was much they could have done to avoid this perception, but there are things we can do to avoid similar entanglements.

I cannot help but think of the fact that, in America, evangelical Christianity and the Republican Party have become closely linked in the public mind. While this is not precisely the same thing as looking like supporters of the “enemy,” neither are they entirely different. It seems to me that widespread anger over what is perceived to be the failure of Republican Party leadership is spilling over to conservative Christianity. This doesn't mean that Christians should all become Democrats or cease to support Republican candidates, but it does mean that we must be careful as a faith community not to align ourselves too closely with any one political party that is not genuinely committed to acting according to a Christian worldview. I myself am largely Republican in my politics, but I do not believe that the Republican Party is synonymous with the Christian Party. Sometimes I vote for Republican candidates with whom I do not agree on some key issues...because I disagree with the other candidates on more – or more crucial – issues. Recognizing that, at present, we are sometimes forced to choose between the lesser of two evils need not mean that we marry ourselves off to one of them.

- 4. Fourth, Christianity is more easily eradicated when its roots are shallow.** Shallow roots appear in several forms. When Christians expend tremendous amounts of energy arguing over minor doctrinal points and denouncing each other as heretics, they are easily swept away. When Christians do not know the Scriptures and do not understand the major tenets of orthodox Christianity, they are easily swept away. When Christianity is a matter of maintaining the status quo

rather than expanding the Kingdom through evangelism and radical Christian living, it is easily swept away. All of these facts suggest that it is crucial that we focus on equipping all believers to live rightly and to represent Christ well in their own spheres of influence. This requires knowing the content of the Bible and rightly understanding that content, and this, in part, is often aided by charitable conversations with other believers who differ in their understanding of minor points of doctrine.

- 5. Fifth, there is a strong correlation between the survival of Christianity in a culture and the way in which the Christian story was told there.** Interestingly, Christianity once thrived in the north of the African continent, particularly in Tunisia and Algeria. It is now virtually extinct there. However, not far away, Christianity survived and thrived in Egypt, even under Muslim reign. The difference? Tunisian and Algerian Christianity was practiced in the language, symbols and arts of the ruling elite while in Egypt, the story of Jesus was told through the language, symbols and art forms of the common people. In that way it sank its roots so deeply into the culture that it could not be removed. As one Victorian scholar noted, “The [northern] African churches were destroyed not because they were corrupt but because they failed to reach the hearts of the true natives of the province...they fell because they were the churches of a party and not of a people.”⁴

I think, for the most part, this is a lesson that the American church has learned better than the church in Europe. While there are still skirmishes on this front, many American churches have come to understand that styles of worship, the use of media and the vocabulary by which we tell the Story must follow Jesus’ model of incarnation. We cannot tell the Story to a culture that we are not, to some extent, part of ourselves. We must be in the world to do our work as yeast must be in the dough to do its work. To some extent, this requires that our Story be told in the language of the people to whom we tell it. Of course, this need not mean that we be *of* the world; we must be exegetes of the culture, too, determining what is fair game and what is off-limits. We cannot become so much a part of the culture that we are no longer distinct from it for, as Jenkins puts it: “too little adaptation means irrelevance; too much leads to assimilation and, often, disappearance.”⁵

It seems to me that the church in Europe did not learn the lesson of incarnation until it was too late and then, in a panic, went too far in accommodating. The result is that the church in Europe is in serious peril today. I think, however, that the American church is on more hopeful ground.

In the end, persecution need not lead to eradication. Throughout history, Christian faith has flourished during persecution because it forces people to either get serious about their faith or stop pretending to be something they are not. Persecution refines the church, weeding out the faithless and strengthening the resolve of the faithful. It forces people to live radically and it forces them to a faith that is not only passionate but deeply-rooted in Truth. Moreover, persecution gives rise to faith that is intellectually rigorous in its understanding not only of itself but of the challenges it faces. These are all good things.

⁴ Jenkins, *Lost History*, 230.

⁵ Jenkins, *Lost History*, 245.

I have no idea what the next decade holds for Christianity in America. There are some storm-clouds gathering that may mean some rough weather, but come what may, I am optimistic. If we learn the lessons of history, even the roughest weather may lead to a church that is far more energized to do the very thing which God has put us here to do.