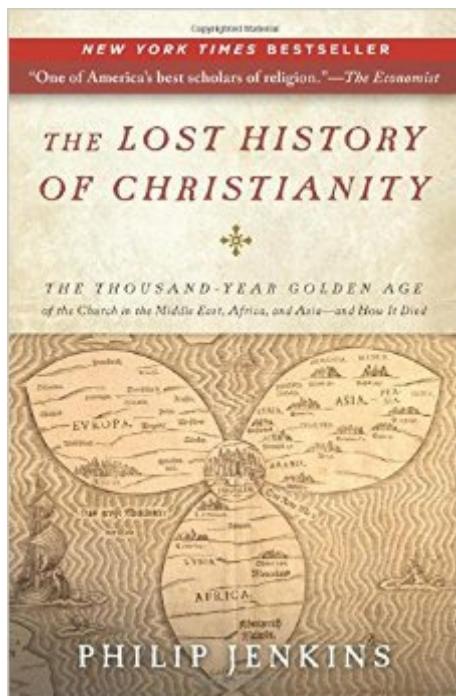


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The Lost History Of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age Of The Church In The Middle East, Africa, And Asia--and How It Died



Synopsis

Philip Jenkins is one of America's top religious scholars. "Forbes magazine The Lost History of Christianity by Philip Jenkins offers a revolutionary view of the history of the Christian church. Subtitled "The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia" and "How It Died," it explores the extinction of the earliest, most influential Christian churches of China, India, and the Middle East, which held the closest historical links to Jesus and were the dominant expression of Christianity throughout its first millennium. The remarkable true story of the demise of the institution that shaped both Asia and Christianity as we know them today, The Lost History of Christianity is a controversial and important work of religious scholarship that sounds a warning that must be heeded.

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Customer Reviews

"The best reason for the serious study of history," writes Philip Jenkins in The Lost History of Christianity, "is that virtually everyone uses the past in everyday discourse. But the historical record on which they draw is abundantly littered with...half-truths...Historians can, or should, provide a corrective for this" (43). For Jenkins, the history of Christianity is especially susceptible to half-truths which highlight the connection of Christianity to Europe, and its role in promoting colonialism and intolerance. Besides oversimplifying its European sojourn, such presentations ignore the long history of the faith in Africa and Asia. Recovering the one-time splendor and eventual destruction of this ancient non-western Christianity is the "corrective" task Jenkins sets for himself in this timely study. For most of its history, "Christianity has been a tricontinental religion, with powerful

representation in Europe, Africa and Asia." (3). Well into the 14th century, eastern Christian groups like the Nestorians and Jacobites spread deep into the Middle East and Central Asia, as far as China and India, where they produced a richness of Christian scholarship, mysticism and culture which was not widespread in Europe until much later. Today, we tend to think that of the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia as inevitably Muslim. But a thousand years ago, despite the political success of Islam, Christianity appeared poised to continue as the dominant faith of these regions. This raises the question: what happened? It is here that Jenkins is most insightful. Politically, he points out how the coming of the Muslims probably appeared more as an "Arab conquest": one more in a string of empires under which the Christians could live.

I was very excited when I started reading this book. Its topic is very interesting; namely, that, though the Western model of Christianity is currently dominant, for a thousand years after the flowering of Christianity, the Christian churches of Asia and Africa were as powerful and influential (and in some cases, more so) as the Western church, and it is only through the chances of history that these churches have been sidelined or, in some cases, completely wiped out. And certainly, though it may serve our (that is, Western Christians') vanity to think that our success was pre-ordained, very small historical changes could have made the modern world look very different. To his credit, throughout the book, Jenkins does manage to make a number of interesting points. Early on, his descriptions of the spread of Eastern Christianity all the way to China and Japan, and his extensive quotations from now forgotten patriarchs of churches often considered heretical today (Nestorians, Jacobites) give vivid credence to his arguments. I was also very taken with his argument of how churches have to make their way "into the villages" in order to survive oppression. For example, the great St. Augustine once led a vibrant North African church from Carthage, yet his urban-oriented church could not survive the spread of Islam whereas the penetrating Coptic churches of Egypt still manage to hang on after over 1000 years of Islamic rule. On the other hand, Jenkins' book suffers from nearly debilitating weaknesses. First, his prose is surprisingly dull for the story he is telling.

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