

The Inevitable Future

GEOFF RYAN, SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2003

*Jesus loves the little children
All the children of the world
Red and yellow, black and white
They are precious in his sight
Jesus loves the little children of the world
(Traditional Sunday School Song)*

The twenty-first century will be regarded by future historians as a century in which religion replaced ideology as the prime animating and destructive force in human affairs.

(Philip Jenkins, The Next Christendom)

"I live in Toronto – but I emigrated to the Global Village."

(T-shirt slogan spotted on a downtown street in Toronto)

In 2002 Philip Jenkins, a professor of History and Religious Studies at Pennsylvania State University, published a book entitled "The Next Christendom". It is an important book and was immediately flagged in the "secular" press which ran reviews of it and analyzed it. "The Atlantic Monthly" ran a summary of it as their October 2002 cover story. It did not seem to hit the radar screens in the church circles I move in, though. I have to date met only one other Salvationist who has heard of the book.

Jenkins main point is this: "We stand at a historical turning point – one that is as epochal for the Christian world as the original Reformation. Around the globe Christianity is growing and mutating in ways that observers in the West tend not to see. Tumultuous conflicts within Christianity will leave a mark deeper than Islam's on the century ahead".

The facts that Jenkins cites, and the scenarios he details, are nothing short of astonishing. Here are a few examples:

- For obvious reasons, news reports today are filled with material about the influence of a resurgent and sometimes angry Islam. But in its variety and vitality, in its global reach, in its association with the world's fastest-growing societies, in its shifting centres of gravity, in the way its values and practices vary from place to place – in these and other ways it is Christianity that will leave the deepest mark on the twenty-first century.
- In 1900 Africa had just 10 million Christians out of a continental population of 107 million – about nine percent. Today the Christian total stands at 360 million out of 784 million, or 46 percent.
- Within the next twenty-five years the population of the world's Christians is expected to grow to 2.6 billion (making Christianity by far the world's largest faith)
- By 2025, 50 percent of the Christian population of the world will be in Africa and Latin America, and another 17 percent will be in Asia.
- By about 2050 the United States will still have the largest single contingent of Christians, but all the other leading nations will be Southern: Mexico, Brazil, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, and the Philippines.
- As migration continues, established white communities (in Europe) are declining demographically, and their religious beliefs and practices are moving further away from traditional Christian roots. The result is that skins of other hues are increasingly evident in European churches; half of all London churchgoers are now black. African and West Indian churches are reaching out to whites, though members complain that their religion is often seen as "a black thing" rather than a "God thing."

Apparently the 21st century will be about religion and that religion will be Christianity. Further it is in

the “global south” (otherwise referred to as the Third World) that this Christianity is growing, developing, mutating and eventually returning in waves to nations in Europe and North America. As a Canadian Salvationist specifically, such information rocked my world and it should have the same effect on your world - a world that is about to change.

The Salvation Army in Canada is predominantly white, middle-class and relatively conservative in views of theology, worship and the expression of faith. We reflect a fading societal mix that started to change decades ago and has accelerated of late. Over the next ten years, Canada will absorb 375,000 immigrants per year. Most of these new Canadians are from what traditionally would be called non-Christian nations, mainly because of a change in Canadian law in 1967 by which the European bias in immigration regulations was eliminated.

Toronto, the city where I presently live is the most multicultural in the world – every year more than 70,000 new immigrants make it their home. Immigration accounts for more than 92 per cent of the city’s total population growth and over 51 per cent of residents are foreign born (compared with, for example, New York’s 28 per cent). There are more visible minorities in Toronto than there are residents in any of the Atlantic provinces, Saskatchewan or Manitoba. Yet, I was at an official Army meeting a few weeks ago in one of the leading corps in the city (the Territory). To get to the corps building I drove through a commercial district that can only be described as “little Persia” - store signs in Farsi advertising Halal meat abounded. Parking my car I experienced a disconnect as I entered our church building and sat in a congregation that was 99 percent white, with a service in English, following musical rhythms and presentation rituals clearly Anglo-Saxon. It would have seemed so arcane and incomprehensible to the surrounding population, had they peeked in (which they rarely do). I left early and went for burger, noting that all the staff in the fast food place were non-white, as were all the diners, apart from myself.

This “problem” of mono-culturalism is shared by most Salvation Army’s in the Western world. This past winter my wife and I were guests at Youth Councils in an American Division. The majority of the 600 delegates to the councils came from a nearby urban centre and were Black-Americans. The leadership (read officers) was almost exclusively white. At some point, in the passage from the teenage years to adulthood, critical choices with

regard to faith and faith community are not being made in the way planned for. Sandra and I were also privileged to attend the Roots conference in the UK this past spring. Close to 5,000 Salvationists from the UK and numerous European territories and Commands annually attend this event. The visible minorities in attendance were extremely visible. In a country as multicultural as present-day Britain, I counted three black people and two Asians.

Numerically our strength in The Salvation Army is concentrated in the global south (India, Pakistan, East Africa). These “reinforcements” are increasingly making their way to Canada and other western nations. The magnitude of population shifts worldwide due to conflicts, crime and economic factors is at a level that has never been approached before in the history of the world. A high percentage of these refugees and immigrants are coming to Canada. But in The Salvation Army we seem only vaguely aware of this as we plan our mission strategies.

For me, the International Congress in Atlanta in the summer of 2000 was axiomatic. I was home on furlough from Russia at the time and could have attended but declined. Most of my friends assumed that I was objecting to the money that the Americans were planning to spend on the Congress (the usual, self-righteous, materialism-eschewing missionary position). But that was not it at all. I have as healthy a party theology as the next guy, and Biblically there is warrant enough for times of celebration, for jubilees, for God’s people to gather together and party and even blow the wad, if necessary. The expense of the Congress was not an issue with me.

The issue was the failure of awareness with regard to the deep symbolism of this Millenium Congress, conducted 135 years after our birth as a movement for the “whosoever”. For practical reasons, the General gave the congress to the United States, specifically Atlanta. Financially, likely only the Americans could have handled it. In this we do need to acknowledge that the vast majority of Salvation Army operations worldwide are bankrolled by the generosity of the Americans. However, by making this call, the primary message of the Congress was that over 100 years after our inception, in spite of the massive changes in the world and on the verge of the 21st century, we are still a Western, white man’s Salvation Army. Regardless that the vast majority of our members are to be found in the global south and that these are our movement’s greatest areas of numerical growth and theological and missiological vitality, in the end it all

came down to who could pay. If we had wanted to be prophetic as a movement, if we had wanted to enter the new millennium with a clear commitment to the diverse reality of the 21st century Salvation Army, the congress should have been held in Delhi or Nairobi or Jakarta.

The Congress was largely attended by Americans, Canadians and Brits who live geographically close and could afford to come. Token delegations of selected Salvationists (primarily musical and cultural groupings) from the southern world were flown in, often to perform. The vast majority of officers and soldiers in the global Army never had a look in. The message, it seems to me, was clear about how “we” view ourselves. I’m hoping it was a “last hurrah” for the old order.

The Catholics wrestle with similar issues to us and so I wonder - will they elect a black Pope before we elect a black General?

As not just a Salvationist, but a *Canadian* Salvationist, the rather bland composition of most of our churches is vexing. As a Canadian I am complicit in a very strange and contradictory cultural identity. Internationally our nation is known as a highly “tolerant” nation. I’ve always considered the whole idea of *tolerance* a little half-baked, patronizing at best and supercilious at worst. One tolerates the kids when they are hyper or tolerates a smoker at the next table at a restaurant or even tolerates one’s in-laws. To tolerate is to grin-and-bear it, to grit one’s teeth and permit co-existence, all the while disapprovingly exercising forbearance and patience. That is what tolerance means. Myself, I prefer simple *respect* – a far better choice than peevish tolerance.

I believe our tolerance as a nation masks a deeper intolerance. Ostensibly we tolerate people from other countries and cultures in virtually every way imaginable from dual-language street signs in ethnic neighbourhoods in Toronto to extremely generous immigration laws and social security provisions for refugees. In every conceivable way, in fact, except in the matter of religion. The recognition that cultural and ethnic lines are more often than not divided along the lines of religion and that this is part and parcel of who people are and what they bring with them when they come to Canada – this is virtually non-existent. Particularly with regard to Christian expressions.

Canada is one of the most secular nations on earth, in practice if not constitutionally. A mixture of ingrained Canadian alienation ergo extreme privatization, an eagerness to be liked bred of a deep inferiority toward

our southern neighbour, Trudeau-era 1960’s, universal-love and the soft socialism of an essentially one-party political scene have converged to divorce religion and faith so thoroughly from public consciousness that the Canadian soul is quite hollow. In point of fact, there is nothing in Canadian legislation that codifies separation of church and state, yet the gulf in Canada is greater than in the United States, for example, where this separation is enshrined Constitutionally. In Canada it is the cultural ethos that drives the political climate.

Here in the great white North, we smile condescendingly at the Americans who have initiated a faith-based funding program that would channel government money to religious groups in order deal with social issues. To me, it is a smart move that simply acknowledges a street-level reality and takes advantage of already in-place networks of credibility. If I want to connect with the large Somalian community in Regent Park, I would go to our local mosque to find them. As Jenkins points out in his book, as predominantly rural societies become increasingly urbanized all over the world, and infrastructures are strained to the breaking point, *“religious communities emerge to provide health, welfare and education... This sort of alternative social system... is likely to grow in importance as the gap between people’s needs and the government’s capacities to fill them becomes wider.”* Americans recognize this but the Canadian establishment will never go there because of ingrained values of tolerant-intolerance, regardless of how new Canadians feel about the role of faith in their lives.

Witness the memorial service arranged by the government on Parliament Hill in Ottawa soon after the September 11 attacks – a profoundly religious act, by the way. No religious figures were permitted to participate, no priests, pastors, rabbis, imams or swamis. All were noticeably absent. The sad spectacle of a gaggle of tired, old and cynical politicians attempting to provide comfort and hope out of their own meagre resources is an image that should burn itself into the consciousness of any religious Canadian. Such is the nature of the Canadian soul. Such is its depth.

The alternate reality, however, is of a vast majority of new Canadians flooding into our cities and towns – *who are religious!* They are connected to their own faith communities in ways that generational Canadians are not. Frequently it is the Mosque or Temple or Synagogue or Church that is at the centre of these varied communities. And more frequently in the future it will be a Christian

church, if Jenkins is to be believed.

Go to a “typical” Canadian suburb (meaning white and middle-class) on a Sunday morning and you will be able to shoot a cannon down the empty streets with no fear of hitting anyone. They will all still be in bed. Go to an immigrant neighbourhood and it will be a bustling hive of activity as people step out in their finery on their way to church.

Among the people who gathered around King David following Saul’s death – also a time of great turmoil and

change – were the “men of Issachar.” In the middle of a long list of warriors and men who brought arms and fighting ability to David’s side, we have mention of these men who, as it says in 1 Chronicles 12:32, simply “understood the times and knew what Israel should do.”

By publishing “The Next Christendom”, Philip Jenkins has rubbed the grime of a “decided opinion” off the window of our changing world and afforded us a glimpse into the future - an inevitable future. Let us look through that window as the “men of Issachar” might.