



# THE MILK BIRD STORY

Cathy Robinson

*In the Zimbabwe folktale “Milk Bird,” a man captures the most beautiful of all birds, with a plume of red and green feathers on its head and colorful feathers adorning the rest of its body. When he returns home and shows the bird to his wife, she tells him that this bird will give milk. She milks the bird, and shares the sweet milk with her husband and her children. Over time, as they drink the milk, the family grows healthier but the milk bird, kept in a dark hut, loses all the color from its feathers.<sup>1</sup>*

Milk from a bird? African folktales usually surprise readers. An important part of the African heritage, they often include the intervention of supernatural forces into human affairs. Death, suffering and sudden disaster are prevalent in these tales, along with an emphasis on traditional wisdom and communal values.<sup>2</sup>

Several scholars have described the practice of Christianity in Africa as similar to the New Testament church: responsive to the daily realities of poverty and persecution; attentive to the supernatural and personal nature of God; expectant of divine intervention, dream-visions, prophecy and faith-healing; and committed to conservative beliefs and morality. In Africa, writes Dr. Philip Jenkins, “we are forced to see the religion not just for what it is, for

what it was in its origins and what it is going to be in the future.”<sup>3</sup>

Jenkins is Distinguished Professor of History and Religious Studies at Pennsylvania State University and the author of *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. He notes that of all the places on the globe, Christianity is growing most rapidly in Africa. In fact, Jenkins predicts that the center of Christianity will shift to Africa in the coming decades.

“The growth there is very remarkable,” Jenkins said in a telephone interview with *Circuit Rider*. “It’s up from 10 million Christians in Africa in 1900 to 360 million in 2000. **I believe I’m right in saying that it’s the largest religious change of its kind that’s ever occurred**

**in human history in any religion...**Africa should have the largest number of Christians by the middle of this century.”

In 1900, about one in ten Africans was a Christian, Jenkins writes, and there were about 100 million Africans. Today, almost every other African is a Christian, and Africa has more than 700 million people. If we want to visualize a typical contemporary Christian today, Jenkins notes, she is already a woman living in a Nigerian village.<sup>4</sup>

“I see a lot of parallels,” Jenkins said, “between America around

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1800—the start of the great Methodist expansion—and the situation you would see in Africa today, where, by the way, there’s a very strong Methodist tradition.” In the 1870’s, Jenkins noted, President Grant said that he had to deal with three political parties—Democrats, Republicans and Methodists.

A number of scholars have commented on the dramatic growth of Christianity in Africa. In *The Future of Christianity*, The Rev. Professor Alister McGrath traces the development of Christianity in Africa from a tiny minority faith and colonial religion at the end of the 19th century, to the dominant faith of the sub-Saharan region 100 years later.

“Gone is the stereotype of western-led churches following western-style worship,” McGrath writes. “African Christianity is led by Africans, preached by Africans, and shows little interest in mimicking western ways of thinking. If anything, African Christian leaders seem to be of the view that western Europe needs to be reconverted to Christianity, and have offered to undertake this rather awesome task if the churches in the west are not up to it.”<sup>5</sup>

An ordained Anglican priest, McGrath is Professor of Historical Theology at Oxford University, England, and Director of the newly-established Oxford Centre for Evangelism and Apologetics. “I think there’s no doubt that African Christians do look at the West with a degree of puzzlement,” McGrath said in a telephone interview with *Circuit Rider*, “because they feel that what was given to them many years ago seems to have lost its way in the West. And they...ask first of all, why has this happened; but secondly, what can they, in Africa, do to try and change things...One of the most interesting things we’re beginning to see in the United Kingdom is the emergence of African-led churches in our big cities, which are attracting significant numbers of ordinary British people.”

In his book, Jenkins cites examples of that same phenomenon in the United States. “African and specifically Nigerian churches like the Deeper Life Bible Fellowship have also targeted the United States, and have been spreading networks of congregations. With its 80,000 Nigerian residents, the city of Houston plays a pivotal role in these schemes. The RCCG [Redeemed Christian Church of

God] now has parishes in Dallas, Tallahassee, Houston, New York, Washington, Chicago, Atlanta, Detroit, and other cities.”<sup>6</sup>

McGrath notes that such shifts can be sources of anxiety for Westerners. “Western Christianity does need to be very attentive to what is going on elsewhere in the world and to learn from it,” he said. “And if it means admitting that we’ve got certain things wrong, we need to do that, and if it means, in effect, recognizing that God seems to be working rather energetically in other parts of the world, then we must acknowledge that joyfully.”

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As Africa moves toward becoming the “center of gravity” of the Christian world, African Christian leaders play an increasingly significant role in global decision-making for the faith, and African-led congregations become more numerous in the West, how can United Methodist pastors get ready?

“United Methodist pastors have a great tradition and a great deal to offer,” McGrath said. “What you need to do is to ask: what is there that we can do that will help us recover the vitality of our faith and apply it to our own situations? And to take great comfort from the fact that Methodism is growing in other parts of the world. And to rejoice in that.”

“Dissent and fragmentation are in its DNA,” Jenkins said in describing United Methodism. “But also it’s a very good model for understanding the role of clusters around the world.”

Jenkins also shared some practical advice. He suggested that United Methodist pastors have a sign put up over the door of their studies so they can see it every day. On this sign would read one of his predictions: By 2050 one third of the people in the United States will have Latino or Asian roots.<sup>8</sup>

“There will be two sorts of congregations in America,” Jenkins predicts—congregations that include very diverse populations and experience a lot of conflict, and congregations that are dying. “If congregations are going to boom and thrive, and include all these different tradi-

tions, there’s going to be a lot of conflict and some congregations will not maintain unity, some will split, that will happen. But the alternative is to have congregations where everyone’s happy, everyone’s agreed, everyone’s 65 and everyone’s white. So conflict and dissent are really not things to worry about, they’re really signs of growth.”

“The key thing is always to ask,” said McGrath, “in what way can we best be the church in our own context? That may mean diverging from some of the practices or outlooks which were characteristic of our European heritage, he said.

Which brings us back to Milk Bird. The children felt sorry for the milk bird, who had lost all the color from its feathers, and they let it out into the sunshine. Soon the colors returned to the bird’s feathers. The milk bird

thanked the children and it flew away happily. The children, however, were distraught and anxious. They walked off into the bush, trying to regain what they had lost.

Will we do the same? □

1 Alexander McCall Smith, *Children of Wax: African Folk Tales*. New York: Interlink Books, 1989, pp.32-38.

2 *Ibid*, pp.1-3.

3 Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p.215.

4 *Ibid*, p. 2-3; see also Philip Jenkins “*The Rise of Global Christianity*,” Center Conversations, No. 23, July 2003 (online at www.eppc.org).

5 Alister E. McGrath, *The Future of Christianity*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002

6 Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 208.

7 *Ibid*, p. 2.

8 *Ibid*, p. 3.

See page 27 to order *The Next Christendom* (Jenkins) and *The Future of Christianity* (McGrath).



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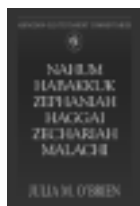
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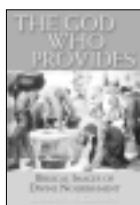
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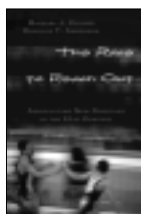
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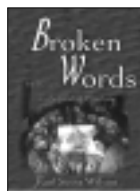
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