Fertility and Faith: The Danger of a Grand Narrative

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Introduction

Philips Jenkins has produced an impressive and wide-ranging book, covering Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, several eras of history, and all regions of the world, from a perspective that borrows from multiple disciplines including history, anthropology, economics, demography and sociology. Jenkins links the demographic transition – wherein societies shift from high-fertility, high-mortality demographic regimes, to low-fertility, low-mortality ones – with the rise of individualism, liberalism, gender equity, and resulting secularisation. He describes the arising likely demo-religious shifts wherein 'old' faith communities (especially in the global north) will increasingly be outnumbered by high-fertility societies of greater religious fervour (often originating in the global south), and wherein conflicts may arise over differing conceptions of religions' role in regulating social and moral norms and expectations. In his conclusion, he outlines some of the ways in which organised religion needs to adapt to remain relevant and popular in the face of global demographic change.

The grand narrative of Jenkins' book – connecting 'the demographic revolution' with the 'transformation of world religions' – is powerful and seductive. With his global scope and historical reach, he weaves a persuasive account of the 'tidal shift' in the demo-religious landscape, which has huge potential geopolitical implications. Indeed, it is the credible seamlessness of Jenkins' grand narrative, together with its potential ramifications, which render this book not only flawed, but also potentially dangerous.

In our commentary, we interrogate three core elements of Jenkins' argument. First, we consider his demographic determinism, calling to account his underlying causal framework. Second, we show how Jenkins' apparent marshalling of multiple disciplines and international history, belies a rather superficial engagement with those individual disciplines and historical processes. Third, we consider how Jenkins' use of language and references demonstrate his particular partisanship, showing how his narrative is both dangerous and incendiary, with the potential to defend populist and racist ideas.

Demographic determinism and causation

Jenkins includes in his introduction a section on 'causation and correlation', in which he argues that 'if the correlation between fertility and faith is strong and easily demonstrated, the precise nature of causation is not so clear' (p.14). He describes 'a kind of feedback loop' wherein fertility and religiosity might change in parallel – for example, a decline in religiosity might loosen so-called 'traditional' gender roles, leading to women bearing fewer children, reducing need for community-based support and hence ties to religious institutions. Yet, throughout the rest of the text, Jenkins' clearly evinces demographic determinism for declining religiosity. He speaks of 'the demographic laws that underlie and shape…religious currents' (p.164). He sees the 'two phenomena' of secularism and fertility decline as 'closely linked, to the point of inevitability', with secularism as 'one fragment of a wider social revolution and thoroughgoing moral reconstruction, all rooted in demographics' (p.48). He acknowledges that the

coincidence of changing demographics and religious adherence 'does not prove causation' but says that 'the more we examine the process of religious transformation, the more unavoidable becomes the demographic interpretation' (p.49).

The book's structure clearly embodies determinism. Jenkins' begins his account in Western Europe, where he describes how the 'freedom and opportunities' demanded by the post-war baby-boomers, including the 1960s sexual revolution and rising opportunities for women led to a 'moving away from families' and the rise of radical individualism which, together with the concomitant rise in social welfare provision, led to a decline in the call for and commitment to institutionalised religion. He points to waning acceptance of Church doctrines on marriage, sexuality, abortion, and contraception in the increasingly liberal context, as well as to the decline in women's volunteerism and service both in the laity and as nuns in the face of competing demands and occupational opportunities. Having set out this narrative for Western Europe, Jenkins then proceeds through the rest of the world, showing how different regions and religions are at various stages on this continuum, with implications for the balance of geopolitics and for immigration.

The problems with such demographic determinism are, first, that it leaves little room for the genuine interrogation of evidence to understand the past, or change over time, while avoiding present-centredness and anachronism, and allowing for complication and diversity. Second, demographic determinism has long provided fodder for eugenic and racist attitudes, and its irresponsible application has serious consequences.

Present-centred history: modernisation, patriarchy, nuclearization, individualism

Since the 1930s, historians have been grappling with the 'fallacies' of writing history 'backwards', or the practice of 'starting from the perceptual and conceptual categories of the present' (Ashplant & Wilson, 2009, p.253). Jenkins' work manifests such 'present-centredness' in three ways. First, in the way that evidence is marshalled, and is often incomplete. In describing the connection between fertility and faith, Jenkins' emphasises examples where a decline in fertility has co-existed with or prompted a decline in faith, and he seeks explanations for that process in social, economic and philosophical terms. He ignores instances where faith has prompted or effected a change in demographics and social/moral order in the opposite direction. For example, in the chapter devoted to Africa, he discusses contemporary high fertility and religiosity, but does not mention the rise in fertility which characterised much of the continent in the mid-twentieth century, and which occurred in tandem with the expansion of mission education and influence, often driven by very direct and interventionist missionary and colonial policies to disrupt and change the moral organisation of reproduction in the region (Dyson & Murphy, 1985; Hunt, 1988; Turshen, 1987; Walters, 2021). Similarly, in describing the role of feminism and the decline in patriarchy in prompting demographic change and religious decline, Jenkins' ignores the role of the church in *instituting* patriarchy and gender inequity in colonial Africa (Baten et al., 2021; Evans, 2015; Summers, 1991; Thomas, 2003). From Africa's perspective, historical scholarship relating fertility and faith would be expected to give far more weight and attention to the coercive practices introduced in the name of Christianity during the colonial period and their demographic and social impacts than Jenkins' gives credence or space.

Second, present-centredness is evident in the way that generalisations are made from a model produced in one context but applied to diverse situations and regions. The universality and inevitability of various processes described by Jenkins – including modernisation, demographic transition, and nuclearization of families – have all been subject to fierce debate, but they are presented as inexorable in this study, and they are also simplified (Greenhalgh, 1996; Sigle, 2021; Szreter, 1993). For example, Jenkins' presents the nuclearization of the

family as inevitable progress from a pre-industrial era when extended and large families were the norm. Such a presentation gives no space to the huge diversity of 'pre-modern' family forms which have been documented, including differences in the timing and universality of childbearing and marriage, inheritance systems and gender roles, as well as plentiful evidence of fertility regulation before the advent of modern contraception (for a summary of the literature see: Guirkinger & Platteau, 2020). There is further generalisation in Jenkins' presentation of female emancipation. His starting point is the image of the male-breadwinner-headed household which he implies was the historical norm prior to the sexual revolution of the 1960s, and that it was the shift away from this norm through female education and emancipation which has triggered demographic and religious 'crisis'. Such a conceptualisation ignores the myriad other forms of family organisation outside of Europe and the US as well as debates about 'nuclearisation' itself (Sear, 2021b). Jenkins' view that women were largely unempowered until emancipation began in recent decades in the West, freedom which then spread to other parts of the world, puts a simplistic narrative on a complex topic. There is considerable variation in female empowerment between populations over time and space, and the assumption that low fertility societies are now 'gender egalitarian' ignores evidence that women are still far from achieving equality in many domains in such societies (Breda et al., 2020).

The assumption that all societies are on a trajectory towards 'modernisation' leads to what Arland Thornton refers to as 'reading history sideways' – the idea that contemporary lower- and middle-income societies represent different stages of the historical trajectory of economic development that the West went through in previous centuries (Thornton, 2001). This narrative in turn can lead to developmental idealism – the belief that, if the West went through certain transformations on its way to economic development, such as female empowerment, then these stages should be desirable goals in their own right, because they will then subsequently 'cause' development to follow (Thornton et al., 2015). What modernisation, reading history sideways and developmental idealism narratives all have in common is the assumption that Western Europe has reached a pinnacle of development to which all other populations should aspire (Reid, 2021; Watkins & Hodgson, 2019). The inevitability and universality of demographic transition is given similar rather uncritical treatment, side-lining the huge diversity in the mechanisms and timing of the onset and progress of transition in different historical and geographic contexts (Johnson-Hanks, 2008; Kirk, 1996; Szreter, 1993). There is little discussion of the role of coercion and/or Western pressure for population control in the global south – a surprising omission given the very public and current debates in this field, especially in the context of rising environmentalism (Klancher Merchant, 2021; Nandagiri, 2021; Sasser, 2018).

The third manifestation of 'present-centredness' are instances in *Fertility and Faith* where no evidence is used at all, and we are left to rely on assertions rendered apparently credible because of the wider narrative. An example is Jenkins' argument for an inevitable relationship between low-fertility, individualism, and religious decline. He provides little evidence, rather asserting that 'many observers' (without citing any) 'have commented on the psychological effects of belonging to families with many children... Large families..tend to value kinship, community, and shared values, and also have a commitment to posterity. That stands in sharp contrast to the individualistic values prevailing in low-fertility societies. As families shrink in size..…they lose the ideological incentive to bear children' (p.37). This grand and unsubstantiated statement ignores vast literatures on the motivations and values that people place on childbearing in different contexts, as well as on the ways in which kinship and relatedness form and re-form through different historical processes (Geschiere, 2020; Nyambedha, 2004). The suggestion that the same factors which are driving a loss of an ideological incentive to bear children are

also driving a disassociation from the community and kinship offered by organised religion is a further leap, and one which is belied by evidence suggesting that the decline in childbearing may actually lead to the rise of many other modes of kin-making and communal life, themselves presenting positive and constructive alternatives to traditional family structures and religious affiliations.

Partisanship, language, populism

Had the title of the book been 'Fertility and Race', it probably would have generated far more heated public discussion and critique. Instead, race is manifest throughout this work under the rubric of faith. In an unattributed paraphrase of W. E. B. Du Bois, Jenkins writes 'to adapt a famous comment made about race, the problem of the twenty-first century is the fertility line' (p.23). This comment seems to manifest Jenkins' vision of the threat posed to 'old stock' (his term) and dying Western Christian communities by the vibrant and demographically numerous growing faith communities in the global south. Jenkins' sense of embattlement is manifest through his language, and his preoccupation with immigration. Jenkins' tries to appear as a non-partisan narrator – for example by explicitly presenting some discussions as stemming 'from a traditionalist or rightist standpoint' – but his arguments are not balanced by alternative perspectives (p.47). A case in point is in the final pages of his chapter on 'Europe's Revolution', where he gives credence to Derek Thompson's 'doom loop of modern liberalism', in which fertility decline is seen as resulting from the rise in liberalism, especially gender equality, but fertility decline inevitably leads to immigration, which 'cannot fail to stir populist opposition' (p.46). He writes that 'From a traditionalist or rightist standpoint, European demographic trends illustrated a decadence amounting almost to a death wish, given the influx of migrants whose values were so distinct from those of an older Europe. In this view liberalism and individualism had become excuses for simple selfishness, a refusal to consider the good of the nation or race' (p.47). Rather than balancing or countering these standpoints with descriptions of positive integration, enrichment of host societies, and significant immigrant contributions, he goes on to give airtime to the 'many works' which present 'great replacement' narratives imagining 'a [European] continent swamped or overrun by teeming masses of migrants' (p.47).

This one-sided description of the potential relationship between declining fertility, rising immigration, and 'inevitable' rise in populism and even white supremacism, is given added emphasis by the language used throughout the book which consistently 'others' and stereotypes non-European races and immigrant communities. Although Jenkins' warns against 'accepting the familiar stereotype of Africa as hopelessly mired in deprivation and chaos' (p.125), on the same page he goes on to describe continent-wide 'systemic corruption and misgovernment' and 'woefully inadequate infrastructure', he points to '*kleptocracy*' in Nigeria, unfavourably compares Kenya's GDP per capita to that in 'an advanced European nation like France or the UK', and argues that 'even in peaceful regions, stable and honest government is a distant dream'. He speaks of Burkina Faso as 'little known to the non-specialist Westerner', as though places and peoples can only be realised through Western eyes; lumps together 'traditional' African religions as 'primal' – a term which implies evolutionary backwardness (p.125-6); he even refers to 'black African nations' in his description of the UN population projections – a racial phrase largely abandoned since the 1950s (p.122). His blatantly Malthusian comments about the inevitability of disaster in the region are unspecific, generalising, and provocative, failing to note either the systematic debunking of Malthusian theory, nor awareness of the coercive and racist ends to which it has been employed (p.133) (Greenhalgh, 1990; Nandagiri, 2021; Sasser, 2018). This othering and negative view of sub-Saharan Africa, then plays into Jenkins' establishment of African Christianity as a threat to the Western Church.

He describes that threat as manifest in sheer numbers, noting how even imminent fertility decline 'would not prevent African nations overwhelmingly dominating the Anglican communion by [2050], or the mainline Protestant denominations, nor would it halt the growing African hold on the Roman Catholic Church' (p.187). Again, the language is provocative – why not simply describe the numbers, rather than presenting this growth as something that should be stopped? The peril is also described in terms of the threat posed by immigrant Christians to 'old-stock white believers' in Europe. Even more than the growth of mosques, Jenkins sees the growth of vigorous and young 'immigrant Christian churches' as a 'challenge' for the 'old-stock' church (p.196). He points to a higher level of conservatism among African Christians, especially relating to issues of gender and sexuality, and of the way in which growing African influence in the higher echelons of the church has therefore led to serious conflicts within Christianity. For example, he describes how the Anglican communion has been 'rent so viciously' by gay rights controversies, contrasting 'liberal Britain' and North America, with the conservative churches of Nigeria, Kenya and Rwanda. In the US, he speaks of 'open schism' between 'mainly white' conservative Episcopalians who are increasingly 'under the ecclesiastical control of primates and senior clergy from Africa—a situation that would have seemed unthinkable a couple of decades ago' (p.131). Nowhere does Jenkins point to examples where religious institutions and beliefs have in fact supported queer identities in Africa, or other examples of a more liberal Christianity emerging in the region (Chitando & van Klinken, 2021). We have focussed here on Jenkins' description of Africa, but the language he uses about the threat posed by Islam is no less inflammatory (p.141).

Jenkins standpoint is also made clear in his sources, as he acknowledges his debt to 'a handful of really distinguished authors' who have similarly tackled the subject of secularisation in relation to demographic change, including Mary Eberstadt, David Goldman, and Eric Kaufmann (p.21). These scholars' 'sophisticated and well-argued' (p.21) theses form springboards for Jenkins' own assertions, without any acknowledgement of the public outcry their works have produced. Kaufmann's *White Shift*, argues that the rise of populism and white supremacism can be seen as a natural and understandable response to immigration, and it has been critiqued by many as providing justification and normalisation for the rise in racist and anti-immigrant politics (Trilling, 2019). Mary Eberstadt situates the rise in identity politics in the sexual revolution of the 1960s, which she argues led to a disintegration of the binary gender identity, the 'traditional family', marriage, and Christian morality, leading to unhappy and disaffected youth who are now seeking kinship through organisation into 'identity' groups, including the rise of the alt-right (Eberstadt, 2019). One of her previous books on similar themes has been described as 'a tissue of propagandistic threads woven into an incoherent whole' (Eberstadt, 2016; Withers, 2016). David Goldman's works on 'how civilisations die' and 'the Great Extinction of Nations' raise the issue of 'cultural suicide', arguing that secularism in Europe and modernity in Islam has led to a lack of faith in civilisation and an arising demographic crisis which will transform world order (Goldman, 2011). Goldman wrote under the penname 'Spengler', borrowed from Oswald Spengler, whose 'The Decline of the West', described the importance of strengthening blood ties to 'save the West' from decline in the interwar period (Valencia-García, 2019). To cite and extol the theories of these commentators without acknowledging the public debates and criticism their ideas have generated is one-sided, and adds weight to the concern about Jenkins' own partisanship and worldview.

Conclusion

The core thesis of *Fertility and Faith* therefore rests on uncritical application of various meta-processes – demographic transition, gender revolution, modernisation, development idealism – and a level of argumentation wherein the narrative is constructed from a self-sustaining logic

rather than balanced appraisal of real-world evidence. Such intellectual Jenga may seem harmless enough as an exercise in social theory, but we argue that Jenkins' text presents rich material for racist and populist thought and action. Jenkins' particular standpoint from the doorway of an 'embattled' western Christianity, is writ large through these pages. He presents the 'inevitable' growth and influx into western countries of people of faith from the global south as a threat to northern congregations and communion, not least through the highly provocative language he employs. His aim may be to mitigate and prevent future conflict, and to enable and empower western Christianity to rise to future challenges, but he cannot be unaware of the potential attraction of his thesis for populist and racist groups (Root, 2019). As a discipline, demography has long struggled with its past connections with racial and colonial approaches; it is distressing to see some of these issues emerge again in the text of *Fertility and Faith* (Sear, 2021a).

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