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An African Scholar's Tribute:

Lamin Sanneh, A Foremost African Theologian from the Gambia: His Theological Thoughts from an African Perspective

By Francis Anekwe Oborji

The purpose of this present tribute is to highlight the African dimension of Lamin Sanneh's writings and theological thought.¹⁸ Although, he worked at the center of the international stage in the world of academia, Sanneh always wrote and lectured from an African perspective and context. Africa remained the animating spirit of his theological writing and engagements until death snatched him away.

Christianity and Islam

Lamin Sanneh was born into a Muslim family and attended Qur'anic school in his native Gambia in West Africa. Later he converted to Christianity, first as a Methodist then as a Catholic. He studied on four continents and specialized in many areas. He also travelled widely, spoke many languages, and interacted with different cultures. All these experiences helped to shape his worldview. His theological perspective, reflected in his writings, covers two major areas, namely the relationship between Christianity and Islam and the study of World Christianity and Missions. His writing highlighted the place of Africa in the emerging world Christian movement in an increasingly globalizing world. He wrote for post-colonial and post-modernity Africa.

Sanneh's theological outlook includes an ecumenical and inter-religious dimension. He ardently advocated for the timely acceptance of cultural plurality that he considered a fact of humanity's historical and religious experience. He called for mutual respect and co-existence between adherents of different world religions. His writings represent the efforts of an African theologian who wanted to show how Christianity and Islam could live side by side with the religious traditions and cultures of African people, in a spirit of dialogue, respect, mutual enrichment, encounter, and tolerance.

¹⁸ This paper is a shorter version of a tribute to Lamin Sanneh available online in PDF format at <https://dacb.org/memories/sanneh-lamin/>.

The Translatability of the Gospel

Sanneh wrote extensively about the translatability of the Gospel into African culture. He contends that the translatability of the Gospel into local cultures and languages is something unique to Christianity in contrast with other world religions. For example, because Allah used Arabic to speak to the prophet Mohammed, Arabic is considered the only sacred language in Islam. Therefore, when the Qur'an is translated into other languages it loses its sacred character. This argument explained why Christianity made more inroads in those places in Africa where traditional religion was strongest but very little progress where Islam had been planted during the Arab invasions of the continent:

Africans best responded to Christianity where the indigenous religions were strongest, not weakest, suggesting a degree of indigenous compatibility with the gospel, and an implicit conflict with colonial priorities... Muslim expansion and growth, which occurred, were most impressive in areas where the indigenous religions, particularly as organized cults, had been vanquished or else subjugated, and where local populations had either lost or vaguely remembered their name for God. For this reason, colonialism as a secularizing force helped to advance Muslim gains in Africa. The end of colonial rule inhibited the expansion of Islam in Africa, whereas the opposite seems to have happened with Christianity.¹⁹

Speaking further on the importance of African local languages in spreading the Gospel, he wrote:

Christianity has felt so congenial in English, Italian, German, French, Spanish, Russian, and so on, that we forget it wasn't always so, or we inexcusably deny that the religion might feel equally congenial in other languages, such as Amharic, Geez, Arabic, Coptic, Tamil, Korean, Chinese, Swahili, Shona, Twi, Igbo, Wolof, Yoruba, and Zulu. Our cultural chauvinism makes us overlook Christianity's vernacular character.²⁰

¹⁹ Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 18-19.

²⁰ Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity?*, 105. See also chapter three of his *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989).

Africa and the Southward Shift of World Christianity

Sanneh argues for the significance of Africa in the new southward shift in the global Christian landscape that has been transformed by new centers of Christianity in the southern continents. He adds that the growth of Christianity in the Global South does not mean a displacement of the “old centers” of the faith. It also does not mean a redefinition of the missionary concept. Rather it confirms that, in the history of Christian mission, faith travels through the missionary movement of believing communities:

When the Christian faith first traveled from Jerusalem to Athens, North Africa and then to Rome, none of the previous centers was displaced by the new ones. And none of the new centers was considered inferior to the “old centers” of Christianity. Each encounter was, rather, a manifestation of how the evangelizing church was fulfilling its mission in the world. Indeed each encounter was a demonstration of Christianity’s universal appeal. Moreover, none of the centers, “old” or “new,” considers itself the sole bearer of the Christian mission. Each center sees itself as a full participant in the evangelizing mission of the church.²¹

Seen from this perspective, the new southward shift is not a matter of concern but instead represents the triumph of the universal expansion and adaptability of Christianity to all peoples in the world. These qualities enabled Christianity to break the cultural barriers of its former domestication in the northern hemisphere to create missionary resurgence and renewal that transformed the religion into a world faith in the 20th century. Sanneh believes there is much to be gained by respecting this historical missionary paradigm.

However, Sanneh underlines the limitations of the concept of mission as one-way traffic, from the West to the rest of the world. In fact, this was his critique of the idea of Christendom advanced at the Edinburgh 1910 Missionary Conference. He makes the case most forcefully in connection to African experience:

African Christianity has not been a bitterly fought religion: there have been no ecclesiastical courts condemning unbelievers, heretics, and witches to death, no bloody battles of doctrine and polity, no territorial

²¹ Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity?*, 36ff.

aggrandizement by churches; no jihads against infidels, no fatwas against women, no amputations, lynchings, ostracism, penalties, or public condemnation of doctrinal differences or dissent. The lines of Christian profession have not been etched in the blood of enemies. To that extent at least African Christianity has diverged strikingly from sixteenth and seventeenth-century Christendom.²²

Mission: From Everywhere to Everywhere

This is the perspective from which Sanneh advances his basic argument on the intercultural process in the history of Christian mission. In the first place, he acknowledges that statistical weight has moved Africa firmly into the Christian orbit in recent years. But we should bear in mind that from its origins Christianity was marked by serial retreat and advance as an intercultural process. Bethlehem and Jerusalem were superseded by Antioch and Athens, while Egypt and Carthage soon gave place to Rome. Rival centers multiplied the chances of further contraction and expansion. Then it was the turn of the North Atlantic world to inherit the mantle before the next momentous phase brought the religion to the southern hemisphere, with Africa representing the most recent continental shift. Sanneh writes:

These developments went beyond merely adding more names to the book; they had to do with cultural shifts, with changing the books themselves. This serial feature of the history of Christianity is largely hidden from people in the West now living in a post-Christian culture. Even in Africa itself the churches were caught unprepared, and are scarcely able to cope with the elementary issue of absorbing new members, let alone with deeper issues of formation and training.²³

The point here is that the concept of Christendom—“mission as one way-traffic”—imprisons the study of non-Western Christianity within a Western theological framework and thus impoverishes the understanding of its nature and significance. It entrenches the notion of Christian missionary movement as a movement from the “old Christendom” (the West) to the so-called “non-Christian lands” (mission territories). It is possible that the experience of

²² Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity?*, 39.

²³ Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity?*, 36-37.

Christendom predisposes Westerners to think of religious phenomena in terms of permanent centers and structures of unilateral control.

These were some of the strands in contemporary missiological thinking that Lamin Sanneh discussed so masterfully from an African perspective in his writings. They all constitute the strength of his scholarship and his contribution to Mission Studies, World Christianity, and Islam.

Conclusion

Lamin Sanneh was an African scholar who sought to reclaim his cultural and religious identity from the legacy of colonialism, and to contribute to an African renaissance in theological and missiological scholarship. To overcome the African identity crisis, his work focused on rediscovering the riches of Black Africa's religious and cultural traditions after over five hundred years of colonial domination by Arab and Western powers. Although sometimes colleagues may have viewed his work through the lens of Western scholarship, Sanneh's scholarly contribution to World Christianity, Islam, and Missions, was deeply African.

As an African Muslim, then a Christian convert, Sanneh entered into dialogue with his African reality and background. Out of his religious experience and journey, he grappled with the question of where his people belong in the increasingly globalizing pluralistic world that encompasses different religions, cultures, and philosophies of life.

During his thirty-year tenure at Yale Divinity School as well as his work at the University of London and on two Pontifical Commissions, Sanneh brought World Christianity and the African presence to the forefront, drawing a global network of researchers and friends into his areas of scholarship and inter-religious engagement.

My condolences go out to his widow, Sandra Sanneh, their son Kelefa, and daughter Sia, as well as to his numerous friends and students in the world of academia and the sciences. With the demise of Lamin Sanneh, Africa has lost one of the greatest scholars and theologians of our time. May God receive his good soul and strengthen the family he left behind. Adieu Professor Lamin Sanneh!

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