

Summoned From the Margin, by Lamin Sanneh

reviewed by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [October 17, 2012](#) issue

In Review



Summoned
from the Margin
HOMECOMING OF AN AFRICAN

Lamin Sanneh
Foreword by KELEFA SANNEH

Summoned from the Margin

By Lamin Sanneh
Eerdmans

For the last three decades, Lamin Sanneh has been a reliable and perceptive guide for those of us trying to think through interfaith issues, rethink missions and understand Christianity in its global reach. When I discovered Sanneh, I found his

angle on Islamic/Christian conversation to be a provocative and refreshing relief from some of the fluff we were getting on that topic. Sanneh's was also the first voice I heard to renovate the commonly accepted negative view of Christian missions.

A major reason Sanneh has been so interesting to scholars in North America is that he is African, grew up Muslim and became a Christian as a young adult. His origins and life story give him a unique perspective among contemporary scholars in world Christianity and missions and enable him to say things about Christianity and Islam that few others can say.

Summoned from the Margin is a gentle, constantly engaging, irenic and revealing story of how North American theological education received the gift of Lamin Sanneh. He opens his story by quoting another African convert to the faith, St. Augustine, as Augustine marveled at the mystery of human memory. In many places in this autobiography, Sanneh's way of recollecting his life reminds one of Augustine's *Confessions*. Born into a polygamous home in Gambia, Sanneh recalls the joys and the challenges of growing up poor, African and Muslim—periods of horrible famine that tested the family, squabbles among his father's competing wives, harsh Islamic schoolmasters and a resigned fatalism that explained all of life's disappointments and injustices as what "God wills." His description of enduring the months of "the hunger season" is unforgettable, a gripping account of famine through a hungry child's eyes. Brace yourself for his gruesome account of his village's circumcision ritual.

With eager anticipation I awaited Sanneh's recollection of his conversion to Christianity, and I was not disappointed. The journey of this brilliant but rudimentarily educated young man from Islam to Christianity is sure to become a classic in the literature of Christian conversion.

"I was not abandoning faith," he says of his entrance into Christianity. "Quite the contrary, I had embraced Jesus because I could not keep him down in my thoughts of honoring God." It is as if his devotion to Islam, his determination to be a true lover of God, led him out of Islam to Christianity. Sanneh found himself drawn toward the Christian faith by his youthful "pestering curiosity," a tendency that was not cultivated by his Islamic upbringing. Islam filled him with a deep sense of God as "ethereal, haunting," as "All-Powerful, All-Knowing, and All-Seeing":

My picture of God was of a being whose mind was so big and whose ears were so good that I could not do anything or be anywhere without God knowing and seeing me, and whose name was so holy I could not say it without being mindful.

In Christianity, particularly in the Eucharist, Sanneh found some of the awesome mystery of the holy God whom he had known in Islam, yet he was now open to a warm sense of God's palpable love and real presence.

We Western Christians—conditioned to think of the Christian faith as a fabrication that comes at the end of our searching, the result of our rummaging about in our egos—will be startled by Sanneh's faith story. He chides the church for its tendency to collapse the miraculous otherness of God's reality into an individual consumer preference. Surely his Islamic past contributes to his polite contempt for much of contemporary Protestantism's "falling for the idea of truth as a matter of individual opinion or choice, and of the church as a function only of the interests and predilections of those it ministers to."

There is no way psychologically, sociologically or anthropologically to explain why Sanneh is a Christian other than to say that Christ found him, not the other way around. Thus the title of his autobiography. Sanneh is a man summoned from the margin who is uniquely qualified to summon the church back toward the center of its faith. His story enables him to be both deeply appreciative of Islam and critical of the Islam inculcated in him in his youth. Yet none of Sanneh's critique of Islam is as trenchant as his insights gleaned during his circuitous, frustrated attempts to enter the body of Christ.

Sanneh acknowledges a debt to the missionary schools that unintentionally introduced him to a desiccated version of Christian faith, and he tells how as an earnest young man he wandered from pastor to pastor, desperately seeking baptism, only to be deflected by missionaries who had compromised mission in their uneasy accommodation to Islamic culture. The story would almost be humorous if it were not so sad. Yet even the account of the missionaries' rebuff is less painful to read than the account of what he received at the hands of liberal, mainline North American pastors who had long before enmeshed themselves in their culture by reducing their ministry to caregiving rather than conversion. As for many frustrated would-be converts in our age, it was easier for Sanneh to find Christ than for him to find Christian community. Eventually he became a Catholic while at Yale.

To see both the North American church and academia through Sanneh's eyes is embarrassing. He does not flinch from describing the racism he encountered in churches in New York and New England when he was a student, and he tells the truth about the racism and cultural prejudices he encountered as a faculty member in the Ivy League. Though Sanneh describes himself as summoned from the margin, in many disturbing ways the American ecclesiastical and academic establishment keeps him on the margin. Yet his remarkable insights on faith and American church life show that the margin is a fruitful location from which to think about following Christ in the present age.

There is irony in Sanneh's autobiography. On the one hand, he purports to explain his life by referring to experiences of his childhood and youth, by citing the influence of other persons on him and by describing opportunities he received and setbacks he suffered. This is the conventional way of autobiography in our culture. And yet, as the book's title indicates, he also wants to say that his life is more than the sum of human influences upon it, and that it is certainly not the result of his astute choices. Sanneh wants us to read his life as the work of a God who creates, calls, summons and evokes. *Summoned from the Margin* could well be Sanneh's most enduring work and may well be destined to take its place as one of the great spiritual autobiographies of our age.