Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity

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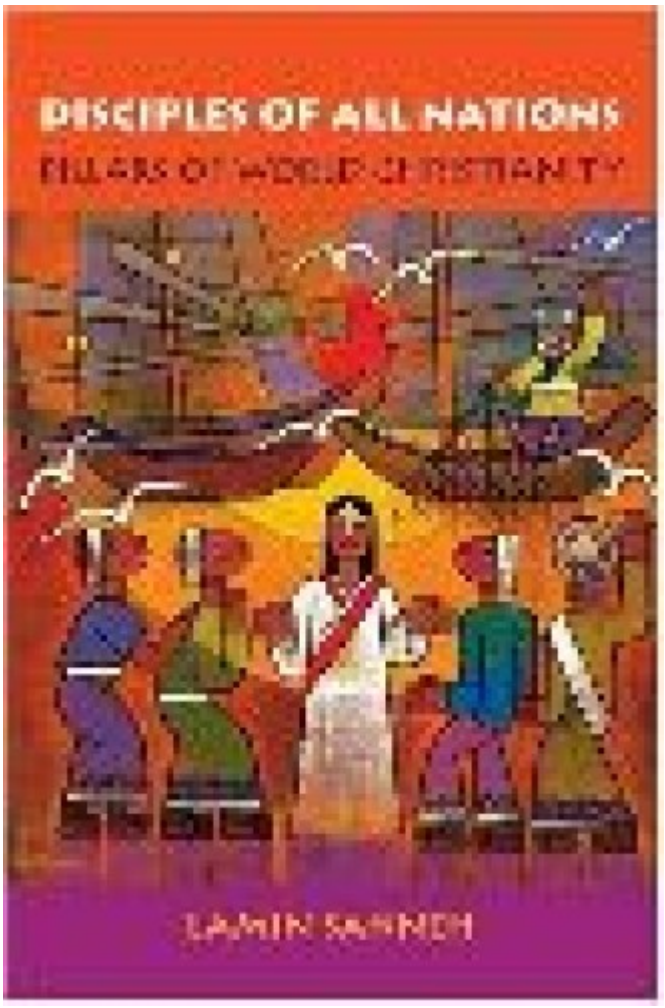
In Review



Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity

Lamin O. Sanneh
Oxford University Press

This book inaugurates a new series, Oxford Studies in World Christianity, to be edited by Lamin O. Sanneh. The “pillars” of Sanneh’s subtitle not only provide the themes for this book but also anticipate works of greater depth and specificity to come later in the series. With Andrew Walls, Philip Jenkins and Dana Robert (all on the series’ editorial board), Sanneh has been among the most persuasive advocates for a new conception of Christian faith based on the new geography of Christian adherence. If more believers worship Sunday by Sunday in the Congo than in Canada, if churches in China are fuller than churches in Europe, if missionaries from Brazil, Korea and Nigeria are becoming more numerous than missionaries from the “Christian West,” then, says Sanneh, it is supremely important to understand how, where and why Christianity has become the first truly global religion.

Sanneh spent his early life in Gambia, received academic training on four continents, is a professor at Yale (teaching Islamic and African studies as well as world Christianity) and an adviser to the Vatican, and has a distinguished publishing record; he is very well positioned to start this kind of series with this kind of book. To be sure, readers interested in a thorough treatment of all parts of the globe will have to wait for later volumes since this one concentrates on Africa, with only one chapter given to another region (China). Moreover, the book’s cohesion arises from its interwoven themes rather than from an argument running directly from point A to point Z. But as a programmatic statement that advances pressing questions and as a provocation jammed full of arresting observations, it succeeds. It is difficult to imagine a more stimulating start to what should be a transformative set of books.

The pillars of the new world Christianity begin, in Sanneh’s view, with the New Testament interpreted as a missionary document oriented toward a cross-cultural, pluralistic vision of the kingdom of God. In his words, the teaching of Jesus and his apostles showed that “territoriality [had] ceased to be a requirement of faith.”

Sanneh defines his “comparative pillar” by describing interaction between Christian and Muslim communities as a dynamic process beginning in the early seventh century and continuing without a break to the present. He discusses medieval Arab charges that Christianity was merely the religion of Roman imperial power and concludes that Christianity survived “the onslaught of Islam” primarily because of the fidelity of monks.

The “trans-Atlantic pillar” points to the crucial transition when missionary activity, which had been assumed to strengthen European empires, escaped from imperial constraints. Sanneh defines this moment, with its revolutionary results as well as its lingering preconceptions, carefully:

> When it succeeded in breaking free of crown control, the Western missionary movement in both its Catholic and Protestant forms carried the intellectual seeds that transformed Christianity into a world religion, though the mental habits of Christianity as Christendom, of Christianity as political kingdom or cultural domain, concealed from people the force of that fact.

In Sanneh’s depiction, interactions during the Age of Empire among Europeans, Africans and residents of the Americas were crucial for this breakthrough. Bartolomé de las Casas, who urged Europeans to respect the humanity of Native Americans, was a key figure because he showed that “the Christian religion is destined for all the nations of the world.” But so was the Kongolese king Alfonso I, whose conversion to Christianity set the stage for his long and productive reign in the first half of the 16th century. (Portugal looms as the villain in Alfonso’s story: its promotion of the slave trade overwhelmed the good being done by such African Christian monarchs.) Also important in this story was Philip Quaque, a Fanti from West Africa who was rescued from slavery in the 1750s, became an Anglican priest, and returned to Africa for 50 years of ministry on the Cape Coast (present-day Ghana). For this pillar, Sanneh underscores not only how momentous it was for the slave trade to quash missionary activity, but also what an important corner was turned when Quaker-Anglican philanthropy and evangelical missionary zeal trumped the slave trade in reaching Africans, African Americans and African-Caribbeans for Christ.

In his discussion of the pillar of colonialism, Sanneh returns to a perennially contested subject. He does not dispute that “missions were organized, funded, and directed from the West, a fact that made it easy to construe them as colonialism at prayer,” but he insists on a “revisionist history” that understands events as always much more than Christianity in service to European empire. For one thing, missionaries and the missionary-minded could be found criticizing colonialism almost as often as they could be seen facilitating it. For another, the churches and schools that missionaries established in order to “civilize” native peoples became for those same peoples engines of empowerment that regularly moved new believers far beyond where missionaries thought they should go.

In a particularly effective section, Sanneh contrasts the empire building of Cecil Rhodes with the Africa affirmations of David Livingstone. Whereas Rhodes subjugated African workers to imperial ends, Livingstone took the workers' side, despite unceasing European criticism of his efforts. It was the legacy of Livingstone and the missionaries who shared his commitment that produced Kenneth Kaunda, Joshua Nkomo, Kamuzu Banda and the other heralds of African self-determination and that eventually transformed Southern and Northern Rhodesia and the other European protectorates established by Rhodes and his ilk: "Rhodes left a legacy of black subjugation under white dominion; Livingstone of irrepressible African aspirations."

Among Sanneh's other pillars are charismatic renewal, whereby the Holy Spirit finds a more congenial home in the world's newer Christian regions than in the settled churches of the West; a principle of criticism, whereby emerging Christian regions bring their own theology to bear in critiquing the older Christian regions; and what he calls the "bamboo pillar," whereby the unexpected burgeoning of Christianity in China testifies to the faith's appeal as both a populist, charismatic religion and a source of cultural norms for intellectuals.

Exposition of these pillars sometimes drifts into hyperbole, as when Sanneh describes the futility of early missionary efforts to ban the drum from African services of Christian worship: "The West's Teutonic inhibitions about worship as an expressionless formal activity in which the body is propped up in a state just shy of rigor mortis contradicted every instinct and reflex in African life. . . . A wet blanket cannot muffle a drum." More often the result is insight without barbs, as when Sanneh offers perhaps the best short account yet written of the history of Christianity in China immediately after Mao Zedong's reign: "As the flood receded, the rock appeared."

The pillar that continually returns as obviously of greatest importance to Sanneh is that of "translatability." Some readers may wonder what more there is to say that Sanneh has not already said in his pathbreaking academic study *Translating the Message*: *The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Orbis, 1989) and more recently in a cheeky volume of self-interrogation, *Whose Religion Is Christianity*? *The Gospel Beyond the West* (Eerdmans, 2003). Yet this theme is so important for what Sanneh believes about the nature of God, about human cultures under God, and about Christianity as an intrinsically world religion that he continues to find new meaning in the process by which the scriptures—and then the whole of Christian faith—move

from one language-culture-mental framework to another.

Sanneh writes that God exists “at the center of the universe of cultures, implying equality among cultures and the necessarily relative status of cultures vis-à-vis the truth of God.” Translatability shows why “no culture is so advanced and so superior that it can claim exclusive access or advantage to the truth of God, and none so marginal and remote that it can be excluded.” It takes flesh in “the ethical monotheism Christianity inherited from Judaism” in such a way that it “accords value to culture but rejects cultural idolatry.” And it shows why “in any language the Bible is not literal; its message affirms all languages to be worthy, though not exclusive, of divine communication.” If the faith embodied in Jesus Christ resounds in its essence “with the idioms and styles of new converts,” it was then inevitable that Christianity would become “multilingual and multicultural.” Sanneh has previously faced the question of whether one activity can bear all of this interpretive weight. This book provides his most convincing answer.

Disciples of All Nations is more an appeal for opening eyes, minds and hearts to new realities than a painstaking account of those realities. Its great strength is Sanneh’s unending series of lapidary insights. As an exhortation, its power lies in the call for fresh responses to the fresh reality that Sanneh evokes in the book’s last words:

> The fact that disadvantaged peoples and their cultures are buoyed by new waves of conversion has created alignments of global scope at the margins of power and privilege. The paradigm nature of the realignment compels a fundamental stocktaking of Christianity’s frontier awakening, and an imperative of partnership with it. When opportunity knocks the wise will build bridges while the timorous will build dams. It is a new day.