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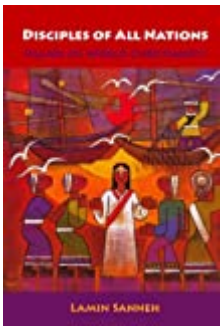

Lamin Sanneh. *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. xxii + 362 pp. $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-518961-2.

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A Pentecostal Perspective on World Christianity

Lamin Sanneh uses his work on West African Christianity (especially *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* [1989] and *Encountering the West: Christianity and the Global Cultural Process–The African Dimension* [1993], among other books) as a lens to retell the history of world Christianity. In his study, the dynamic engine that has driven the missionary expansion of Christianity becomes the vernacularizing process. Hence, rather than being told from a Latin, Western, or European (and then American) set of perspectives, the story of Christianity is deconstructed and told from the "underside" of history, from the viewpoint of the evangelized, as it were. The result is not a retelling of Christian growth from a "passive" or recipient angle; instead, Sanneh revisits the Christendom and colonial metanarratives from the other side of the margins and boundaries where gospel and culture have interfaced. In Sanneh's account, then, culture has always been caught up in the processes of Christian expansion, but now we realize that the culture under consideration has included not only that belonging to what we call Europe, but also to that of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, each in all of its complexities and diversities.

The table of contents of this book fails to tell the reader that the book's subtitle, *Pillars of World Christianity*, actually serves as a metaphor for how Sanneh understands the foundations of Christianity as a worldwide phenomenon. Sandwiched between an introductory and concluding chapter are seven chapters, each of which has a subtitle that includes an adjective describing the "pillar" that the author discusses–but these subtitles do not appear in the contents. Sanneh organizes his narrative as follows. The "comparative pillar" (chapter 2) describes Christianity through its encounter with Arab peoples, and then through the interactions between Christianity and Islam during the broad scope of the medieval period. Next is the "trans-Atlantic pillar" (chapter 3), which tells the various stories of New World Christianities, especially as viewed through the lens of the slave trade and slave experience. This is followed by the "colonial pillar" (chapter 4), which explores the intertwining of missions and Christian independency in the sub-Saharan context. The "pillar of charismatic renewal" (chapter 5) is enigmatic, since its focus is not on pentecostal or charismatic movements, as the subtitle suggests, but on the unfolding of various pietist traditions in especially East African

contexts. Sanneh then shifts to what he calls the "primal pillar" (chapter 6) of independent forms of Christianity in West Africa. The last two pillars are the "critical" and the "bamboo" (chapters 7-8), which discuss the final dissolution of mission as interwoven with the colonial enterprise (as seen through the works of Roland Allen and Vincent Donovan) and the emergence of Christianity from out of the heart of Maoist China.

When put together, Sanneh's portrait of world Christianity is one that emphasizes indigenous agency, vernacularly formulated and articulated practices, and thoroughly diversifying processes from start to finish (or to the present). Even the initial chapter–which is not subtitled using the "pillar" notion, but which features a number of sub-sections that identify various "pillars"–on Christian expansion during what historians have traditionally called the "patristic period" is replete with examples of Christian translation in its movements outward from Jerusalem throughout the Mediterranean world and into England and Ireland. Christian uniqueness, then, is precisely is translatability, mutability, and adaptability: world Christianity is what it is because of its paradoxical capacity to both be transformed by its encounter with "otherness," on the one hand, while at the same time being able to absorb and even transform "others," on the other hand.

Pentecostal historians and scholars will be interested in *Disciples of All Nations* for many reasons. Three that I will briefly discuss are the historiographical, missiological, and theological. First, at the level of historiography, Sanneh's approach to world Christianity can be read in some respects as an extension of the theory of pentecostal origins propounded by what has now become known as the Hollenweger School (including Allan Anderson, Michael Bergunder, and others). The latter's emphasis on the indigenous factors behind pentecostal emergence in various locales throughout the global south can be said to prefigure the story told in *Disciples of All Nations*, except that in Sanneh's case the focus is on Christianity as a whole rather than on one of its (recent) sub-traditions. Of course, I am not suggesting a simplistic identification of Sanneh's methodology with that of Walter Hollenweger's and his students. Rather, I surmise that those open to reconceiving pentecostal historiography in accordance with the Hollenwegerian set of approaches (e.g., Anderson's is by no means equivalent to Bergunder's) will not have any trouble following Sanneh's basically post-Christendom and postcolonial account. However, those who remain unconvinced about the Hollenwegerian approach to pentecostal origins, reading Sanneh may lead to either of two (at least) responses: either they will be led to revise their estimation of the Hollenwegerian proposals or they will reject the plausibility and viability of Sanneh's rendition.

Second, at the level of missiology, Sanneh's agenda is concisely captured in his summary of Donovan's assumption that "God enabled a people, any people, to reach salvation through their culture and tribal, racial customs and traditions" (p. 237). The gist of the idea is that given Christianity's translatability, the distinctive message of the gospel is one that is (to use various missiological notions) incarnationable, inculturatable, contextualizable, indigenizable, etc. Most pentecostal missiologists or theologians of mission will probably not have much trouble with the suggestion that indigenous cultures are capable of receiving the gospel in their own languages precisely because (at least in part) the pentecostal worldview and cosmology of angels, demons, and spirit being dovetails well with indigenous cosmologies. However, Sanneh's discussion of Christian expansion through the encounter, confrontation, and interaction with Arab and Islamic cultures suggests that Christian translatability is not limited only to primal or indigenous traditions. Sanneh does not explicitly say that Christian translation in Arab contexts produced an Arabic form of Christianity, but he does describe in elaborate detail how Christian identities have been forged through brushing up against the Islamic world. A careful reading of Sanneh's work may require pentecostal rethinking of the mission to Muslims. But, Sanneh's thesis also raises questions that he does not address, namely, whether his thesis of translatability is suitable to what we might call secular or modern cultures, especially as seen today in Europe and North America. To be more precise, if pentecostals can agree with Sanneh about the cultural translatability thesis, does this apply only to indigenous cultures, but not to major/world religious cultures (like Islam) or to modern secularist cultures?

Finally, Sanneh suggests that the globalization process, if applied to Christianity, will result in its death since globalization can only be understood in terms of homogenization. In this case, the globalization of Christianity would be a twenty-first-century version of the Christendom or colonial projects of the past. Instead, the salvation of Christianity, for Sanneh, consists in its ongoing vernacularization. If so, I suggest, pentecostalism could hold forth the greatest potential for creative and constructive theological reflection in the twenty-first century, since its genius may well reside in its intuition that the gospel always comes in and through the con-

crete particularities of humankind's many tongues and languages. In this case, whereas the twentieth century saw what we might call the "pentecostalization" of Christianity as a world religion, the twenty-first century possibly will unveil the "pentecostalization" of Christian theology as a form of world religious discourse.

All this suggests that Sanneh's scholarship will give pentecostal scholars much food for thought, potentially leading to interesting debates in the field. Readers may find much to disagree with along the way. What these disagreements might be, I will leave up to readers of this review who pick up and read *Disciples of All Nations* to decide for themselves.