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Review of Lamin Sanneh, Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity

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LAMIN SANNEH. *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity*. Oxford Studies in World Christianity. Oxford: Oxford Press, 2008. 362 pp. \$19.95.

Lamin Sanneh is professor of History and World Christianity at Yale University, and author of the influential academic study *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Orbis, 1989). He writes the inaugural volume in the “Oxford Studies in World Christianity,” a series whose purpose is to investigate “the new reality brought about by the shift in the center of gravity of Christianity from the northern to the southern hemisphere” (xxii). In this book, Sanneh “offers a panoramic survey of the field, exploring the sources to uncover the nature and scope of Christianity’s worldwide multicultural impact” (xxii).

Sanneh has a wide ranging and truly global perspective on world Christianity. His historical accounts span continents and centuries. The book takes the reader back to the origins of Christianity, to witness its birth in Europe, and then moves forward to explore its relation to Islam and development in Africa and Asia. Sanneh narrates the birth of Christianity in England and Iceland and gives the reader an illuminating examination of the struggle for effective contextualization in those countries. His accounts of various historical figures, the prophet William Harris, Vincent Donovan, and the freed slave (and probably one of the earliest development workers) David George are absorbing. His tales of the interaction of Christianity with Islam and how China has been shaped by the Christian faith are also intriguing. Sanneh’s eloquence, his gift as a storyteller, and his skill at placing historical events in their proper social context make the book worth reading despite its shortcomings.

Sanneh uses the language of “pillars” often in the book. Although never clearly defining what he means by this term, it is evident that he does not mean “columns” or “posts” that hold up the structure of World Christianity and instead wants us to understand these “pillars” as “motifs” or “roots” spread throughout and undergirding the global story of Christianity. One major motif he emphasizes throughout the text is the way that colonial missions planted the seeds of the demise of colonialism by encouraging Scriptures and worship in the local vernacular. Another motif is the way Christianity is, by its nature, the most flexible of the world religions in the way it is enculturated.

The book is geared toward readers with a strong academic background and presupposes more than a basic familiarity with the topic. Thus, it is not the right book for someone just beginning to explore Christian doctrine, mission theory, or the history of Christianity. In spite of (or maybe because of) the book’s ambitious scope, Sanneh’s work was frustrating to read. The book’s lack of a clear organizational structure to orient the reader is distracting. At no point, for example, does he lay out all of his “pillars” side by side. Thematically, it was difficult to understand the flow of the book. It contains eight chapters that seem to stand almost completely independent of each other. Each chapter dives into a certain period in a region’s history, but there is little explanation of how these accounts and observations are to be understood in relation to each other. Early on, Sanneh confesses: “I offer the book not as an exhaustive statement or even as a complete case study, but as an ecumenical conspectus of the field of World Christianity as I have seen and encountered in

my professional work, especially in its interreligious manifestation” (xi). This seems an apt description of a book full of fascinating stories but containing little to help the reader piece Sanneh’s insights and observations into an integrated view of the development of global Christianity. There are just enough materials linking the stories together to make it more than a collection of articles, but not enough continuity to discern how the pieces in this panoramic picture fit together. Reading the book is like zooming blindfolded through a tour of an unfamiliar city at the hands of a superbly qualified guide. This guide removes the blindfolds at some interesting sites but does not aide the visitor in understanding how the different vistas fit together into a coherent vision. More should be expected out of such a gifted writer and historian.

Upon completion of the book, this reviewer felt that the fascinating assortment of stories coupled with a lack of clear overarching organizational themes produced a product that is not unlike the state of world Christianity today—interesting, diverse, growing, and complex in a way that makes divining clear “pillars” or motifs extremely challenging—even for the most celebrated of historians.

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