



## ISSUES IN GLOBAL CHR



Discussed: Bible translation, tolerance, evolution, diversity, tribalism, culture of choice, commitment to secularism, nonwestern Christianity

STIANITY

## Who Sets the Agenda for the World Church?

A Conversation with Lamin Sanneh

In his 2003 book *Whose Religion is Christianity?* Yale professor Lamin Sanneh discusses two streams in Christianity flowing in opposite directions: the contemporary confidence in the secular destiny of the West as an elevated stage of human civilization, which is matched by contrasting evidence of the resurgence of Christianity as a world religion.

We pick up the conversation in a question-and-answer format similar to the book and in anticipation of the conversation that will take place with him at the 2005 Association of Adventist Forums Conference, October 6–8, in Silver Spring, Maryland.

## Growth

SPECTRUM: *In your book, you list several factors that fueled the growth of the Christian church in Africa: the end of colonialism, mother tongue development and Bible translation, indigenous cultural renewal and local agency, and the theological stimulation of the Christian adoption of the African names for God. Can you explain how each of those factors operates?*

SANNEH: The end of colonialism removed the obstacle to the growth of the church; mother tongue develop-

Since faith is a matter of being persuaded of the truth of religious claims, it puzzles me how faith should still be of any value once any number of social issues are deemed to be more important. That only makes the choice clearer, I would have thought. It is, however, a completely different matter if the argument is about how faith may help dissolve barriers between and among us. That requires work and patience.

SPECTRUM: *You take issue with explanations of the evolution of religion set forth by people such as Robertson Smith and Freud, who describe it as growing from polytheism,*

It surprises me still that the West can continue to be so sanguine about the unqualified benefits and promises of secularism for the world.

ment and Bible translation stimulated local response and allowed local theological reflection to happen, while the adoption of African names for God provided the indigenous background to Christianity. How "those factors operated" was tied to what each represented.

SPECTRUM: *What can the West learn from world Christianity? In that learning, how can it also preserve and impart the values of equality, solidarity, and science that transcend the tribalism, discrimination, and economic inequality that plagues the world?*

SANNEH: The West can learn that Christianity is a world religion that finds expression in the languages and idioms of the peoples and cultures of the world. About transcending tribalism, discrimination, and economic inequality, there is no foolproof formula for that, not at least on this side of eternity. In a more critical sense, equality and solidarity can never transcend anything; they can only help us to accept each other as who we are.

SPECTRUM: *What do you say to Christians who value their faith, but are wary of new convert fundamentalist commitments to traditional texts and cultural habits that hurt women, homosexuals, and ethnic minorities?*

SANNEH: I am not sure how believers in any religion can have both their religion as well the objections of those who are opposed to their religion. For example, some people object to any number of Christian claims as oppressive: the Bible, God, Christ, the Trinity, and so on.

*tribal, and nonrational thought to self-knowledge and rational cosmos. Is not Christianity in the developing world just a higher step on that ladder of sociological progress?*

SANNEH: The evidence cuts both ways, if you like, in the sense that Christianity has spread among people living in simple societies with a rural subsistence economy, from ancient Syria, Armenia, Egypt, Ethiopia, and India to modern examples, and that religion seems to be on the wane in advanced, sophisticated industrial countries of the West.

It should not be hard to remember that Christianity happened centuries before the theory of evolution. The question posed actually discounts Christianity as having any intrinsic merit, reducing it to a function of physical need. Once our needs are satisfied, then Christianity can be adopted as something ornamental. I am not sure that describes what the Church has understood as the gospel.

## Culture

SPECTRUM: *You mention that Christianity is the religion of over two thousand different language groups in the world; more people pray and worship in more languages in Christianity than in any other religion. Furthermore, Christianity has been the impulse behind the creation of more dictionaries and grammars of the world's language than any other force in history. You have said this "shows that you don't have to be a religious agnostic in order to be a devout pluralist." How will this organic diversity lead to tolerance and human solidarity?*

SANNEH: There is nothing mechanical or inevitable about tolerance and human solidarity, though it can be argued that there is no stronger basis for achieving those goals than the diversity and pluralism Christianity has pioneered. The issue is not really about whether diversity conflicts with tolerance and solidarity, but about whether you can have genuine tolerance and solidarity without diversity, and whether diversity amounts to anything worthwhile without a core commitment.

SPECTRUM: *Please comment on what the culture of the West has done to Christianity that differs from the emerging world Christian culture. You say that Christianity helped Africans become renewed Africans, not remade Europeans; what do you mean by that?*

SANNEH: In an earlier question you stated what you take to be the Western impact on Christianity, that is, the West submitting the religion to the stripping of evolution and the Enlightenment. That has resulted, with the West holding religion within the bounds of sovereign reason.

China, India, and Africa, for example, are constituted differently, and that allows Christianity to be received in cultures defined by a religious way of knowing and thinking. Still, in those cultures a privatized Christianity has struck root, thanks to the influence of the West, which is the source of that notion of religion.

It is instructive to reflect that in spite of Western antagonism to the post-Western Christian resurgence, no country in the non-Western world has established a Christian theocratic state, whereas many countries have instituted secular Marxist regimes, along with massive abuses of human rights. Over half a million people were killed by one such regime in Africa in just two years.

Christian fundamentalism has not assumed state power and its attendant abuses the way secular fundamentalism has, in spite of the West's alarm about Christianity. It surprises me still that the West can continue to be so sanguine about the unqualified benefits and promises of secularism for the world. I think the way Japan and India, for example, have adapted secular ideas for their respective societies may be instructive for others, including Africa.

SPECTRUM: *So did Africans embrace Christianity because its values resonated with the old religions?*

The West can learn  
that Christianity  
is a world religion  
that finds expression  
in the languages  
and idioms of the  
peoples and cultures  
of the world.



Africans are no exception to that rule, though in their case they are much closer to the tribal ethos of Jesus' Jewish background than are Americans.

SPECTRUM: *You disagree with claims that world Christianity is Third World syncretism, blended with vestigial paganism, cargo cultism, and implacable tribalism. What is the different picture that you see?*

SANNEH: The onus is on those who contend that non-Western appropriations of Christianity are illegitimate expressions of the gospel. It was not so long ago that English was considered a taboo and syncretistic language, with a ban on its use in the Church. Those who

SANNEH: That seems obvious. All of us receive new ideas on the basis of ideas we already have. For the first Christians, religion was what devout Jews believed and practiced. Christianity was accordingly framed in Jewish categories. When Greek-speaking Christians adopted the faith, they recast the religion in the mold of Greek ideas and categories: the Messiah of Jewish Christians became the "Christ" of Greek believers.

That pattern has been repeated throughout the history of Christianity. In the United States, freedom of religion is twinned with free enterprise, and that has transformed Christianity into something of a free market notion.



Faith in God does not seem tied to economic success or failure, though the modern West is reluctant to accept any other way of looking at the subject.



does not make Christians necessarily unfaithful to the teachings of Jesus.

Christianity is not Islam, with its untranslated and untranslatable Koran. Translations of the Koran are deemed interpretations that may not substitute for the original Scripture in Arabic.

*SPECTRUM: You speak about a "fresh understanding of the gospel in history." What do you mean?*

*SANNEH: In the West, history is the story of nations and states, and their military and economic power. The meaning of history is the goal of national supremacy, and that means essentially the defeat of competitors. Fukuyama has developed that argument in his book, *The End of History*, where he sums up*

violated the ban paid a horrendous price for their action.

After much blood was spilled in the cause, English finally triumphed as a language of Scripture and worship. The Church adopted the word *God* for the Supreme Being of Scripture and of the prophets even though *God* was an Anglo-Saxon pagan term used of warlords and heroes.

It seems a different issue about "implacable tribalism," for the question assumes that ethnic and tribal identity are incompatible with being Christian, like requiring Christian Italians to speak Chinese to overcome their linguistic differences! We should remember that no Christian group worships in the language in which Jesus preached and worshiped, and yet that

the end of the Cold War as the inevitable triumph of a market-oriented West.

The spread of Christianity, however, has not been coterminous with the triumph of a market-oriented West, and that suggests a different ideological rationale for the gospel in history. Faith in God does not seem tied to economic success or failure, though the modern West is reluctant to accept any other way of looking at the subject.

*SPECTRUM: On the topic of a convergence between world Christianity and the liberal West, you acknowledge that to be a tough question. You point out that some writers say a major challenge is posed to Western civilization by the disconcerting fact that its critical religious and moral convictions are now primarily upheld by communities belonging to a post-Western Christianity. In that view, Christian militancy will rise to threaten the values of a liberal West.*

*You add that Africa has become—or is becoming—a Christian continent in cultural as well as numerical terms, whereas on the same scale the West has become—or is rapidly becoming—a post-Christian society. What challenges loom in the future?*

*SANNEH: Appropriately, this is the mystery thirteenth question, and your guess is as good as mine. But I think the direction of future challenges seems set. The West is firmly committed to the pact with secularism and to the culture of individual choice, and it accommodates Christianity into that comprehensive commitment. As ecumenical leaders put it, it is the world that writes the agenda of the Church, not the other way round.*

In the present mood of a post-Christian West, a resurgent post-Western Christianity is unwelcome because it threatens a return to religious intolerance and cultural backwardness. That was how many Western bishops reacted at the 1998 Lambeth Conference of the worldwide Anglican Communion convened in Canterbury.

The West is confident of its irreversible liberal secular gains, but Christianity is surging in the non-Western world. The two currents seem destined to converge in a collision. The West has added the cultural gap to the poverty gap to stigmatize the rest. But I see a glimmer of hope in less culturally compromised Christian groups in the West playing a helpful mediating role in this cleavage.

*On va voir*, as the French say.