

Discussed: frontiers, marginality, moral decisions, status quo, heritage,  
law, kingdom, leadership role

# Christianity at the Frontiers

*Lamin Sanneh's Response  
at the AAF Conference, October 8, 2005*

I've been asked to respond to what I've heard and what I've learned since I arrived at this conference. I've learned a great deal. Yesterday was quite a feast. It was like a banquet; we had a veritable cornucopia of riches. There is time now only to nibble at some of the crumbs that I have been able to take away with me.

I've never met Seventh-day Adventists before; this was my first exposure. But I was struck by several things from yesterday and today. Seventh-day Adventists—at least this particular group—come to the tradition with many, many caveats and many disclaimers that struck me.

On the one hand, you can say there is evidence of self-criticism going on within the community itself. You don't take yourself for granted, and you don't take your teachings for granted. But when I listened to the lectures and the emphasis on salvation, hope, mission, and Sabbath, and tried to process the caveats and disclaimers that I heard, I'm constrained to

think that one could reposition Seventh-day Adventism not in a spectrum, like the title of your journal, but on what I would like to call "the frontier."

This is what I mean. There are three ways to look at the history of religion and the history of Christianity. Those three ways we can group under one rubric: the idea of marginality. I heard a lot about how Seventh-day Adventists really are marginal, a small group within the broad spectrum of Christianity. I gather that you do not claim to represent the spectrum of Christianity. That's why I mention the frontier. Because you don't represent the spectrum, in a sense, your mission is very



much on the margin. That means that you bring to the idea of marginality a theological component.

In American culture, we are busy about integrating people who have been marginalized, whose rights have been denied and who have been discriminated against. We are bringing them into the mainstream. In that sense, we are busy in America mainstreaming people. That kind of marginality is what I call "imposed marginality." The displaced, the oppressed person, the woman whose voice has been silenced, those who have been excluded, have been excluded against their will, a kind of imposed marginality.

From the point of view of religion they don't have much agency. Nobody listens to them; their voices do not count. Nobody sees them because of the color of their skin. Nobody reflects on what they say because they are not capable of abstract thought. They are not organized; they are not rich. They are marginalized in a sociological-economic sense. In an economic sense, they are denied the rights available to the majority. That kind of economic marginality, of economic deprivation, is something that we all want to overcome.

There is a second kind of marginality that you might call "functional marginality." It is the marginality that comes from the fact that you and I are mobile. We move, take jobs in different cultures, in different cities. I have students that come to me in New England from different parts of America. For many of them, it is a cultural shock to be in New England.

This kind of marginality is functional. It is a result of choices we make to go to school, to get a job, to get married. We move and find ourselves a minority in that community where we happen to be. But that is different from the first kind of marginality. This is the marginality to equip oneself, to get married, to get a job to find a new center in life. It is not deprivation.

But there is a third kind of marginality, which is the marginality of those who have reflected on mainstream values and find the status quo unacceptable. So they make a decision, a kind of moral decision. To explain this moral decision, let me use the metaphor of the academy. I have my professional degree, my publications, I am offered tenure, I have a chair, but when I reflect on the condition of the world, I'm not sure that is what I want to give my life to. So I opt out, I check out. And this checking out is a form of moral scrutiny that I want to bring the world to.

Martin Luther King is a good example of this. There are many, many others—Gandhi, Mother

Theresa, people like that—who could do very well in the world as it is, but who decide no, no, no, we have a different calling, a different vocation. This kind of marginality is by choice. It is not against your will, and it is not accidental; it is not a function of the geography of mobility.

I suggest to you that this kind of marginality—moral marginality, ecological marginality, whatever—is absolutely crucial to the religious life. What it represents is a challenge to the status quo, a challenge to people settling for the way we do things. This form of marginality challenges the system. It is not a ghetto marginality, which says I will eschew the world, the world is evil, I will not be contaminated. That kind of marginality is permanent, and it makes you a historical fossil, irrelevant to the mainstream and to the culture.

The moral marginality that I am talking about is the marginality that is willing to take everything and challenge it—the mainstream and status quo values—in order to transform it. This is the marginality that takes religious vocation and sets it on the path of pilgrimage, for here we have no abiding place. It is a marginality that looks forward to the consummation of truth and right. I have a suspicion that Seventh-day Adventists belong to this critical edge, critical margin.

The idea that I get from some of the remarks is that somehow you should become a bourgeois organization in the business of mainstreaming everybody else to partake of the good things of this life. I think that would be a fatal betrayal of your own heritage, insights, and the peculiar role that you can play in the history of the world. There is no time more auspicious to talk about the Sabbath—as we heard from Herold Weiss—as obedience to the law or the fulfillment, looking forward to the kingdom.

It seems to me that you have been peculiarly placed at this juncture in the history of Christianity to study the dynamics of other movements. You are particularly placed to take a leadership role in the consummation of Christianity from the hinterlands, from the frontier.

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