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Prof. Lamin Sanneh at a conference in 2014.

Dr. Lamin Sanneh 1942–2019

Translating the Message with Lamin Sanneh

Joel Elowsky

Professor Lamin Sanneh died this past January 6, 2019, in New Haven, Connecticut, from complications due to a stroke he had suffered a few days earlier. He had just accepted an invitation to speak at Concordia Seminary's Multiethnic Symposium and was looking forward to the visit this May, as was the seminary community. His death is a loss to the church and to world Christianity. There have

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been any number of tributes to a man who had such a significant influence and impact on world Christianity.

The Yale website details all the different academic positions he held in Africa, England, and here in America at Harvard and Yale. He authored and edited at least a dozen books on relations between Christianity and Islam, along with over two hundred articles that were stand-alone monographs or parts of collected works on history, Christianity, or Islam. He received numerous awards, among which was the *Commandeur de l'Ordre National Du Lion du Senegal* and appointments on commissions by two popes. He was a professor, prolific author, colleague, church-statesman, mentor, husband, father—and friend.

I first got to know Lamin in 2007 when he had reluctantly accepted an invitation to return to Africa for a conference I and others were hosting on early African Christianity. I say “reluctantly” because by that time in his career his attention had turned from world Christianity to Islam. He was born into a Muslim family and so always had a special place in his heart for Islam. He was convinced the future of Islam lay in the pacifist tradition, but was not naïve enough to believe that all Muslims would agree on that point. One of his last books, *Beyond Jihad: Pacifist Impetus in Muslim West Africa and Beyond* (Oxford, 2016), which I reviewed last year, details his thesis more fully. He championed support for those Muslim clerics who were trying to take on the more radical forms of Islam, often at risk for their own lives.

The readers of this journal are more likely familiar, however, with his seminal text, *Translating the Message* (1989, 2nd ed. 2009), which has had an impact on a generation of missionaries and mission scholars alike. The premise was simple: Jesus spoke in Hebrew and Aramaic, and yet the very Scriptures that recorded His life were already immediately after His death and resurrection rendered in translation into Greek, and then Latin, Syriac, and a host of other languages up to the present.

Christianity, Lamin never tired of saying, was the most translated religion in the world. And this was by God’s design. Other religions relied on a particular language for their authority. For instance, the authentic Q’uran must be read in Arabic in order for it to be authoritative. Authentic Judaism finds its roots in Hebrew. But Christianity is not tied to one language or one people or culture, as the events at Pentecost made clear. It was and always is meant to be translatable across cultures, ethnicities, every tribe, language, and tongue (Rev 5:9; 14:6). The implication for missions was clear: one culture is not “better” than another culture or closer to authentic Christianity. The Gospel is for all.

This message resonated in Africa and has resonated in other parts of the world as well. When I was asked to lecture in Uganda to four hundred military leaders from around the continent, the question they wanted answered was: Is Christianity the White Man’s Religion? This was the message they had been hearing from their

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Muslim neighbors and practitioners of African Tradition Religion (ATR). It seemed an obvious question to me. No, Christianity is not the white man's religion. "Red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in his sight" went the childhood song. But to my audience, the question was anything but childish. It was a burning question and one the African Lamin Sanneh, scholar from Harvard and Yale, had taken seriously. He answered not only directly, but in a way that took into account the way of thinking of the majority world, the Two-thirds World, the global South. Whatever expression you may choose to describe where the majority of Christians are living in the twenty-first century, it is not the exclusive domain of the white man, woman, or child, and definitely not that of only Western Christianity, as Lamin insisted in his introduction to the second edition of *Translating the Message* when he wrote:

It is past time we overcame the barrier of the Western restriction of the religion. Colonial powers, for example, suppressed non-Western cultures even where they happened to embrace Christianity. The Christian name was not sufficient protection against political disfavor. On the contrary, in many places it was a handicap to be a Christian: the name as such did not spare you the fallout of Western secular distrust or of local suspicion. Many people saw that Westernization bestowed benefits that took no account of Christianity. Yet the obverse of the case was also obvious: Christians became such for reasons eminently independent of Western support. The situation called for adopting a confessional position to the effect that the achievement of Western civilization is not Christianity's prescription for the backwardness of non-Western societies because the gospel supersedes claims of progress and backwardness. That stance is implicit in Bible translation.

When we were traveling around Nigeria, Ghana, and other countries in Africa to packed crowds of young African students who flocked to the lectures, the refrain of Christianity's translatability across languages, cultures, and times never grew old. But what fascinated me most about Lamin and these lectures was how he always had such a deep interest in the students, in the young people he encountered—perhaps more so than for the administrative officials or others who were always clamoring to see him for photo-ops, although he was always gracious. But the students were always his first concern and it was evident he enjoyed the encounters immensely.

In the acknowledgment section of *Translating the Message*, Lamin notes, "The academic life is notorious for the toll it takes on time, concentration, and personal isolation for which a true, if often rare, collegiality is the real antidote." I enjoyed that true, rare collegiality on many occasions over the last eleven years with him. I learned what it means to be a scholar, a gentleman, a devout Christian, but most of all, a friend.

Requiescat in pace