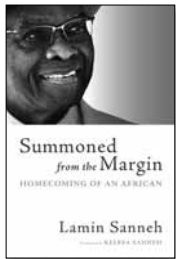


Book Reviews

Summoned from the Margin: Homecoming of an African, by Lamin Sanneh (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012, pp. 299)

—Reviewed by H. L. Richard

Editor's note: An earlier review of this book in IJFM 29:4 provides a more comprehensive review of its contents.



Lamin Sanneh's autobiography ushers the reader into a very different world, in fact a number of very different worlds, and into their respective views of the world. Truly entering into an alternate worldview is one of the greatest challenges (and deepest rewards) of cross-cultural service. Many cross-cultural workers never gain so much as an inkling

of resonance with the worldview(s) of the populations they work among, which is partly due to the lack of a guide to help them see and feel from alternate viewpoints. Sanneh's book is such a guide *par excellence*, and thus a priority read for all who teach and learn on cross-cultural encounter.

From growing up in a polygamous family to achieving education from among an illiterate population, to converting to Christianity without even the slightest tinge of cynicism towards his previous Islamic faith, to experiencing the West as an unprepared African, to rising in academia while remaining an outsider, to his conversion to Roman Catholicism, the whole expanse of Sanneh's life is exotic to the average reader of Christian mission. He is one of us, a devoted follower of Jesus Christ who celebrates the embrace of the gospel across multifarious cultures, yet not at all one of us in many of his experiences and perspectives. Sanneh's life story causes us to "mourn with those who mourn and rejoice with those who rejoice" and helps us to do so with peoples even further removed from our own experience.

This "review" is thus little more than an exhortation to read the book. I wish to present sufficient evidence of the familiar yet strange flavor of the text in order to entice readers to engage the full text, and the full text must be read to perceive all the nuances which are absent from the selective quotations that follow. Perhaps it is fitting to trace these select quotations from late in the book to early in the book, as an alteration in worldview is the end sought by this review.

Nothing is more shattering to the reader of this story of a convert from Islam who rises to great success as a Christian than this deeply ambivalent statement late in the book:

My children have asked me what bound me to Christianity after all I have gone through, and it's hard to know how to answer. A different form of the question has been asked by several Muslim friends, including inquirers who wished to join the church. They demanded to know why I converted, hoping my answer would be encouraging to them. My plea to them not to convert took them by surprise. I told them, "You must be out of your mind to contemplate such a thing." "Then why did you do it?" they pressed. To take my own medicine I rejoined: "because I was out of my mind." They looked me over, knowing that I had not lost my mind, and yet wondering what had really clinched it for me. My response to would-be converts was my clumsy way of indicating that I would not wish on anyone the exposure of conversion compounded by the ambivalence of church and Christian groups. (pp. 257-58)

Sanneh's entire story is of a person who never fit in. The "homecoming" of the subtitle and of chapter fourteen refers to entering the Roman Catholic Church, yet the quote above from chapter fifteen shows that Sanneh never actually found a home in Christianity, always remaining an alien in very fundamental ways. From a radically different cultural world, Dayanand Bharati recommends following Jesus as a Hindu rather than converting to Christianity, suggesting "Better a hostile home than a suspicious though friendly neighbour." Sanneh's experience of "ambivalence" from Christians runs throughout his book, and "suspicious though friendly" is a good commentary on his term. Whether Sanneh's Muslim "home" should be described as "hostile" is debatable as he maintained warm relationships with many Muslims.

This widely reviewed book is claimed to be more an intellectual than a personal autobiography. Sanneh's failures and finally success in marriage are barely mentioned (his son writes a striking and important foreword, but gets no space in the text), while his intellectual insights are highlighted and count as a very compelling reason to read the book.

Sanneh is a genuine voice from the new church of the global south. He suggests that true ecumenism will no longer be about doctrinal definitions, but rather multi-culturalism.

World Christianity overcame obstacles local and foreign to surge with the primal impulse of the gospel; as a source of renewal and hope, the movement should challenge us to overcome our cultural shibboleths and bring us into our true ecumenical inheritance. Christian unity is now a matter of intercultural openness more than a question of doctrinal axe-grinding. The way ahead lies in embracing that reality as a worldwide challenge. (p. 238)

But Sanneh is not optimistic about prospects in this direction, as evidenced in his constant dismay over his experience of Protestantism. "Home" churches continue to be condescending towards the newer churches of the former "mission fields."

Mission fields were once colonial domains, appropriately remote, but now they were to be considered frontiers of authentic Christianity? Many felt that to be nonsensical, and without a shred of credibility. In whatever formulation it occurred, the Christianity

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of the non-Western societies was separated by too great a gulf from the Christianity of the West to amount to much theologically. Post-Western Christians forfeited the empathy of shared religion by virtue of falling short of the West’s cultural standards. The unwieldy term “Two-Thirds World” gives the illusion of the West surrendering the quantitative argument without budging necessarily on its qualitative reservations. (p. 228)

Protestantism in its missionary expression in the Islamic world is also scrutinized, with both colonial governments and local Christian developments being critiqued.

In the Muslim world Christianity was stumped by Western imperialism more than by any other force, with the accompanying Western-inspired modernization furnishing the Muslim world with tools with which to launch and maintain an anti-Christian cultural resistance strategy. (p. 167)

In the final analysis, Christianity has the status of a lower caste in Muslim lands. (p. 105)

Sanneh’s mark was primarily made in the realm of analysis of Bible translation, about which he shares this striking thought in the midst of broader discussion of bias, academic curiosity and translation.

. . . native tongues launched and accompanied the Christian movement through its history. I noted to my colleagues my surprise that Christianity seems unique in being a missionary religion that is transmitted without the language of the founder of the religion, and, furthermore, how the religion invests itself in all languages except the language of Jesus. It is as if the religion must disown the language of Jesus to be the faith Jesus taught. (p. 222)

A final lengthy quotation from the early, pre-Christian life of Sanneh will close this review of a book that needs to be deeply contemplated.

I was introduced to her [evangelical missionary Bednall] during one of her one-woman evangelistic forays at a tea event she hosted in her flat, but I couldn’t make sense of what she was saying. With a bubbly, outgoing personality, Sister Bednall pumped a Bible into my hand that I never opened — I thought no such thing existed, and here she was thinking her sunny, hugging disposition could pass off a fake as the real thing. I didn’t know if I should wash my hands for touching an unclean thing. I should state here that for penance, I kept in touch with Sister Bednall long after she retired and went to live in West Yorkshire to tend her ailing father. Until her death we maintained a faithful annual Christmas exchange of cards and gifts. In all that time Sister Bednall had no idea how strange charismatic religion was to Muslim society, and to the end she remained baffled and befuddled by the firm rejection of her message in spite of genuine affection for her. (p. 98)

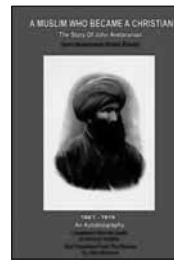
And thus traditional mission work continues in the Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist worlds, grasping at straws

of hope while the reality is that audiences react warmly from deep traditions of hospitality while massive fissures in intellectual and spiritual perception leave non-Christians deeply perplexed at the strangeness of both messenger and message. Sanneh’s book doesn’t solve many problems, but it succeeds in lucidly presenting an alternate perspective that needs to be heard by Western Christians.

A Muslim Who Became a Christian: The Story of John Avetarianian (born Muhammad Shukri Efendi), Second Edition, by John Avetarianian with Richard Schafer, translated by John Bechard (Sandy, UK: AuthorsOnline, 2003, pp. 271)

—Reviewed by Duane Alexander Miller Botero

Note: This work was originally Published as Geschichte eines Mohammedaners der Christ wurde: Die Geschichte des Johannes Avetarianian (Potsdam, 1930).



I have devoted a good amount of time over the years to the topic of Christians who come from a Muslim background, and who once confidently asserted their Muslim identity. Such individuals rarely write explicit theological texts, so this means that if one wants to study such people, one must spend time with them and get to know them personally, or read what they do write. And what they do write, and have written, are usually their life stories.

Since the 1970s or so, when the number of (known) conversions from Islam to Christianity really started to increase and branch out into different places (i.e., Pakistan, India, Egypt, Iran), many such books have been published.¹ But I was quite interested to find this book of a Turkish Muslim who explicitly left the religion of his family when he turned to Christ. This original 1930 conversion narrative has been recently translated by John Bechard from the German, and to the best of my knowledge, it’s the earliest existing autobiography of a Christian from a Muslim background available in English.

Born Muhammad Shukri Efendi, as the complete title indicates, this writer and subject of the book lived from 1861 through 1919. Born into the prestigious Ottoman effendi class, Shukri was a descendent of the Prophet himself. He spent much of his early years traveling around with his odd and peripatetic father—a mystic who could not settle down.

As a follower of Jesus he was brought to a point where he could deal openly and honestly with anyone, be it one of his own people or a member of his own dervish sect, or Christians from a variety of backgrounds.

He became involved in the exotic Yologhli sect, and was a religious teacher in his town. Shukri found a New Testament in Turkish, and searched for its meaning, which he did not find on visits to the Armenian church. As he gradually came to believe in the message of Jesus, it caused no little anguish to him, and eventually, he writes, "it became clear to me that I could no longer perform the Muslim prayer rites with a clear conscience" (35). He resigned from his position.

Shukri was able to use his secretarial skills in drafting documents and official letters to make a living. Eventually he got to know some Protestant missionaries and found the fuller meaning of life and God he was looking for (though he is critical of their fear of publicly baptizing converts from Islam). He voluntarily took the name John Avetarianian: John, in recognition of John the Baptist as herald to his people, and who pointed them to Messiah; and Avetarianian because it is Armenian for *son of the Gospel* (41).

Avetarianian mastered Armenian and lived and ministered among Armenians for some time, and the rest of the book relates his lengthy and colorful missionary career. This career took him from living among Uigar people of Kashgar (in what is today west China), to Bulgaria where he saw the devastation of war first hand. His wide-ranging activities included preaching, personal evangelism, translation, apologetics and publishing. One of the main endeavors in his lifetime was to see Scripture translated into Kashgari. His recollections of living in the remote mountains of west China among the Kashgar people, translating little by little the Bible, interacting with the strange Catholic missionary living there—this is one of the most interesting parts of the book. We are finally informed, near the end of the book, that eventually his translation was printed and used in spreading the Christian message among the Kashgar people. After an adventurous and interesting life he died and was buried in Germany.

The original 1930 German-language edition was mostly written by Avetarianian, but the final section was written by his colleague and fellow missionary, Richard Schafer. But an immense amount of work has been done by John Bechard, who studied German language and literature at the University of Kansas. The book, in its second edition now, contains ten appendices, which make up a good quarter of the volume. Here are references to biblical and Qur'anic verses, recondite information on the Yologhli sect, and helpful geographical information whereby the reader can connect the 19th century map of Europe and Asia to that of today.

The book is not always easy to read, since three different hands have contributed to it extensively. Shafer's original foreword

and the translator's notes are in there, as well as his concluding reflection (Chapter 28). Then Bechard's concluding reflection (which is critical of Shafer's) is presented, And though a bit hard to follow at times, it is well worth the reading. Bechard was astute in not letting the book to end with Shafer's rather triumphalist conclusion. Shafer thought that Muslims would "be won for the gospel" and then stand with Christians in opposing the post-World War I unbelief which had "stripped our much-praised culture of its Christian character . . ." (188). In retrospect, this was naïve and clearly wrong. The places where Shukri ministered have indeed seen a growth in conversions from Islam to Christianity, but the numbers are quite modest and do not call for any sort of triumphalism. Nor is it clear that the conservative, evangelical Christianity of Shafer is triumphing over humanistic secularism in his native Germany. In fact, there is a good amount of evidence to the contrary.

Bechard, who has no qualms in acknowledging that he himself is a (presumably evangelical) Christian, is more astute in appreciating the texture and versatility of Muhammad Shukri Effendi/John Avetarianian, whom he describes as,

. . . a man from a very elite background who as a follower of Jesus was brought to a point where he could deal openly and honestly with anyone, be it one of his own people or a member of his own dervish sect, a young Jewish woman on a train, or Christians from a variety of denominations and backgrounds. (189)

I am of the opinion that this is a work of great value, even for scholars or readers who have little interest in the topic of religious conversion from Islam to Christianity. One learns a great deal about the everyday life in the Ottoman Empire and beyond, about various dervish tarikat (sects), the Balkan War, and the strategy and execution of Protestant mission during the period. If Bechard is sometimes over-zealous with detail that can slow down the pace of the story, and if the appearance of the book itself is not entirely attractive, these minor reservations should be ignored, for this is a valuable and fascinating work whose translation into English was well overdue.

Endnotes

¹ Examples would be: *I Dared to Call him Father* by Bilquis Sheikh of Pakistan (Chosen Books, 1978), *Iranian Christian* by Nasser Lotfi (Word Books, 1980), *The Torn Veil* by Gulshan Esther of Pakistan (Marshall, 1984), *Into the Light* by Stephen Masood of Pakistan (OM Publishing, 1986), *Against the Tides in the Middle East* by Mostafa of Egypt (International Evangelical Research Center, 1997), *The Unfolding Design of my World* by Iranian Anglican bishop Dehqani-Tafti (Canterbury Press, 2000), *Jumping through Fires* by Iranian migrant to the USA David Nasser (Baker, 2009), among others.

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