

Gambian theologian gives voice to the South

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 4, 2006 All Things Catholic

As a slogan for the future of world Christianity, a paraphrase of that old tune "Age of Aquarius" by the Fifth Dimension might do the trick: "This is the dawning of the Age of Africa."

As a small, but telling, sign of the times, consider that the new mayor of Kiev in the Ukraine, Leonid Chernovetskyi, belongs to a Pentecostalist church called the "Embassy of God," founded by a charismatic Nigerian immigrant named Sunday Adelaja. The last place one might expect an eruption of exuberant African-style Christianity is a strict Orthodox stronghold, yet the "Embassy of God" now claims more than 25,000 members across Ukraine and is growing rapidly.

Africa, whose Christian population grew by 6,708 percent in the 20th century, adding something like 16,000 converts a day, has become a big-time exporter of evangelical zeal.

If this reality has yet to fully register on the Catholic radar screen, it may be because African Catholicism does not yet have the high-profile interpreters that Latin America enjoyed in the 1970s and 1980s. Figures such as Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez and ex-Franciscan Fr. Leonardo Boff enjoyed massive international success, making Latin American "liberation theology" a household word. So far, there is no similarly prominent African voice.

What's missing, in other words, is a "Gutiérrez of Africa."

One candidate for that role may be Lamin Sanneh, a distinguished Gambian theologian and descendant of the *nyanchos*, an ancient African royal house, who teaches at the Yale Divinity School. He's also an editor-at-large of *The Christian Century*.

Sanneh grew up a devout Muslim. His grandfather and uncle were both influential Muslim clerics in West Africa, and he was destined to follow in their footsteps, attending a strict Islamic school where he became well-versed in Arabic and Islamic theology. Yet the more Sanneh studied, the more he became fascinated by the figure of Jesus in the Koran. [Jesus is mentioned roughly 100 times in the Koran, one of the reasons that Christians initially thought of Islam as a Christian heresy rather than a separate religion.]

Meditating on the deep meaning of the Cross, Sanneh came to what he describes as a decisive conclusion: Suffering is not alien to the nature of God, as his Islamic teachers had insisted, but is at the heart of God's compassion.

The precocious young Muslim then decided to convert to Christianity, well before he had ever been to a Christian liturgy or attended a Christian school. His astonished family initially thought he must have fallen in love with a Christian girl or simply wanted to drink booze, underestimating his determination by a country mile. Sanneh began a long journey, with stops in Methodism and Anglicanism before he became a Catholic in the

mid-1990s.

In books such as *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Eerdmans, 2003) Sanneh has traced a compelling vision of African Christianity, which he argues only really began to take shape after Western missionaries had largely abandoned the field. Among experts, his work has a growing following.

If Sanneh is not yet a celebrity, part of the explanation may be that just when you think you have him figured out, he ziggs when Western logic dictates he should have zagged.

For example, he bluntly says too many Westerners talk out of both sides of their mouths, reciting the Creed at Mass but not seeming to take it seriously in their personal belief system. Yet he's also a passionate advocate of allowing Christianity to be shaped by the cultures it encounters, a strong critic of colonialism and the injustices associated with globalization, and he believes in an inclusive Catholicism without "litmus tests."

Similarly, Sanneh understands the dangers of jihadist Islam; he largely agrees with Benedict XVI about the difficulties of reconciling Islam with pluralist democratic cultures. Yet he's no Cultural Warrior. He speaks admiringly of the religious seriousness of Muslims, and says he's working on efforts to nudge them into a more moderate direction. Sanneh is a longtime collaborator of both Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, former President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, as well as Rome's Pontifical Institute for Arab and Islamic Studies -- both reputedly "dovish" on Islam.

Conventional labels of "left" and "right," in other words, just don't fit. On July 24, I sat down with Sanneh in his New Haven, Conn., home. Below are excerpts from our interview.

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What will the rise of the South mean?

Believers in the South are less concerned with drawing borders and defending Catholicism in terms of what should be excluded. On the frontier, the borders are moving and dynamic. The Third World orientation to church is different. In the West, "the church" means the hierarchy. On the frontier, "church" means the People of God who turn up at Mass and receive the sacraments. They're less conflicted about papal authority, papal teachings, drawing borders, and so on. They're passionate about a church that is open to the world, embracing the world, and celebrating life in the world.

As one small example, in the West it's typical for someone not to come Mass if he or she is sick. On the frontier, the typical thing is for people to come to Mass saying we are sick, and we look to God to heal us.

Catholicism talks about the People of God in mission. Frontier Catholicism will help make that a reality. For example, the fellowship groups these people organize are very impressive. Small faith communities are a natural endowment of frontier Catholicism. ... Ordinary Catholics, for example, are doing heroic work in villages. The nature of church leadership in the future will reflect this.

We're beginning to see evidence of the same phenomenon in China. We're seeing the emergence of leadership in dynamic Catholic communities in rural areas, with little formal theological education but with tremendous wisdom. This is a tremendous pastoral gift. Bishops in these communities don't come through the normal career path. Theological education will change to reflect all this. ...

How will we notice it in the United States?

For one thing, the Irish Catholic leadership of the American church will change. It already is changing, becoming more Hispanic. This kind of Catholicism is more active in mission, and it's more Third World-oriented. It will bring a Third World point of view to issues such as immigration and asylum seekers, employment and labor, and so on. In previous eras, the Irish Catholics affected the inner cities of the United States. As the Protestant elites abandoned the inner cities, Catholic immigrants moved in. They acquired property, their children went to schools, they voted, and eventually had a political impact. Hispanics will do something similar to change American politics.

What about the argument that while the South may have the numbers, the North still has the money and the political power?

There are two forces in the church today. There's what I call "heartland Catholicism" in Europe and North America, which has great endowments, beautiful cathedrals, art, libraries, and great centers of theological study, but a declining membership. Then there's "frontier Catholicism," which is bursting at the seams, but which has no great legacy in philosophy, theology or art, and few financial resources. Eventually the frontier will overtake the heartland in terms of setting priorities, even if for now it has little money, clout, or administrative infrastructure. For example, I expect that China will help correct the one-sidedness of Western theology.

Let me run some images of southern Catholicism by you. Many believe that southern Catholics, especially in Africa, are more conservative on sexual morality, and that as they become more prominent, it will push Catholicism in a conservative direction on issues such as homosexuality. True or false?

False, because it depends on a completely false premise. There's nowhere in Africa or Asia that I'm aware of where Catholic bishops have supported laws criminalizing homosexual behavior. It's not criminal in Catholic Africa or Catholic Asia. It's where the Muslims are the majority that it's illegal.

I was at the Lambeth Conference [of the Anglican Communion] as an advisor to bishops from the Third World when this issue came up, and they said we don't want it on the agenda. They wanted to discuss issues such as poverty, HIV/AIDS, corruption and violence. In response, the West adopts the strategy of name-calling, that the church in the developing world is primitive, backward, superstitious, and so on.

Another image: Catholic leaders from the Global South, whether bishops, theologians, or pastoral workers, are generally more interested in external issues such as those you listed above than internal Catholic debates. True or false?

Certainly true. In frontier Catholicism, the most important question is, 'What can we do to help our neighbor?' rather than 'What are my rights in the church and how can I protect them, to make sure they're not infringed upon?' That's not Catholicism for them. We feel a real responsibility for the shaping of society. Our societies are new. They have to reinvent themselves, and Catholics want to be sure that their church makes a significant contribution. It would be fatal to be self-preoccupied, because others will fill the vacuum.

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