

# The Resurgence of Christianity

Contrary to Conventional Wisdom

## To recap:

- Secularization has not brought about the predicted “demise” of religion
  - We are witnessing a “resurgence” of religion
- Christianity, never an exclusively “Western” religion
  - No longer centered in Northern and Western hemispheres
  - 2/3 of Christians now live in the global south (“tipping point” was c. 1980)
- Christianity remains the largest religious population in the world
  - continues to grow at the same rate (or better) than the global human population
  - About 1/3 of the human population identifies as “Christian” today

Why haven't we noticed this epochal shift?

Theology and seminary resources remained fixed on models of "missions," "church growth," and "church planting" ("exporting")

Thinking and resources continued to focus on Western perspectives

Methods of theology and missiology failed to take seriously the data brought forward by social-scientific studies

Shift in  
thinking:  
missiologists  
*in situ*

### Stephen Neill (1900-1984)

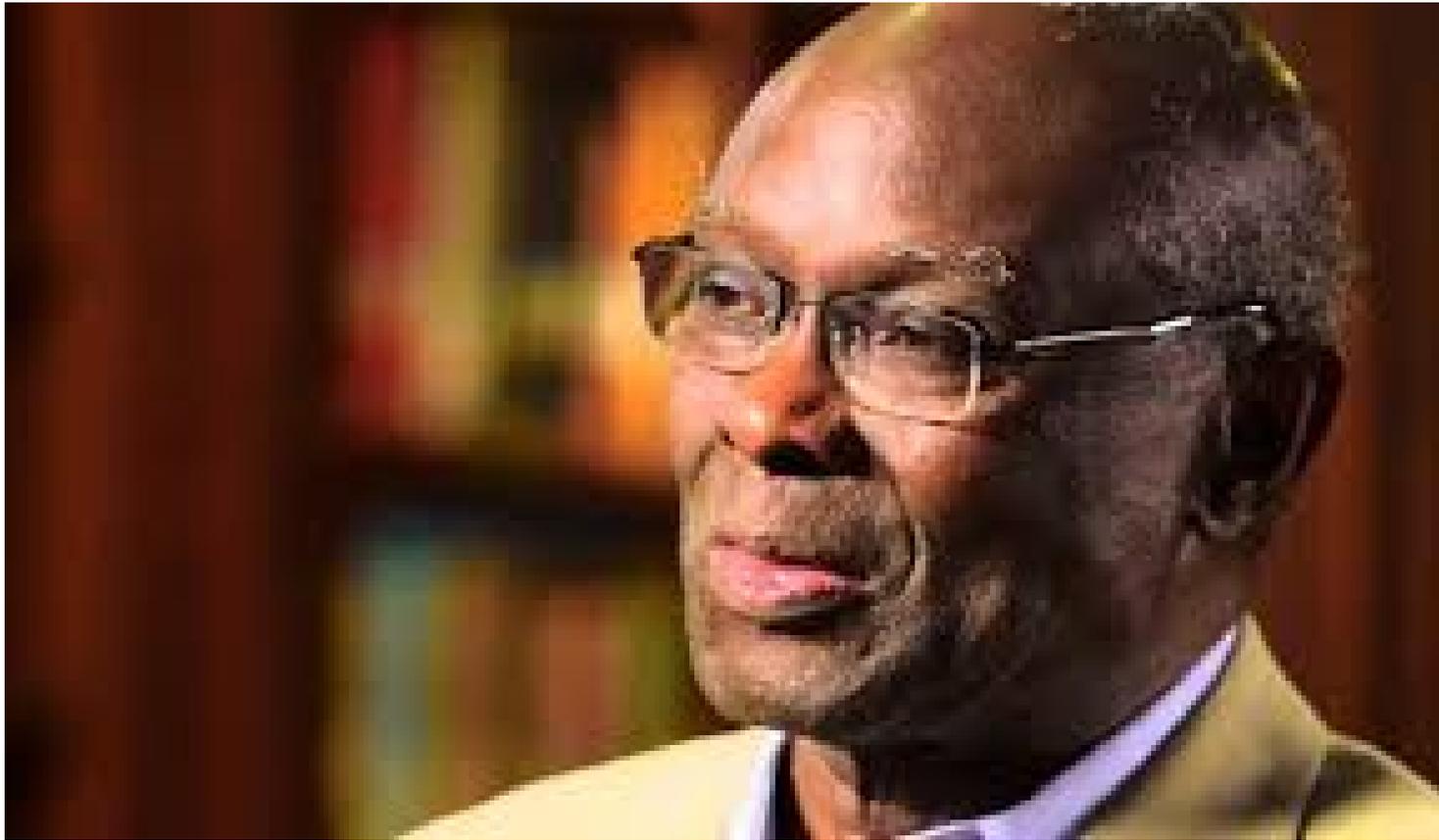
- Anglican, born to Scottish missionary family
- Instrumental in establishment of Church of South India
- Prof. of missiology in Germany and at Oxford

### Kenneth Scott Latourette (1884-1968)

- Historian, Yale University;
- attentive to developments in Asia (taught in China)

### Andrew Finlay Walls (1928-)

- Taught in Sierra Leone and Nigeria; focus on search for an “authentically” African Christianity
- Founded “Center for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World,” University of Edinburgh

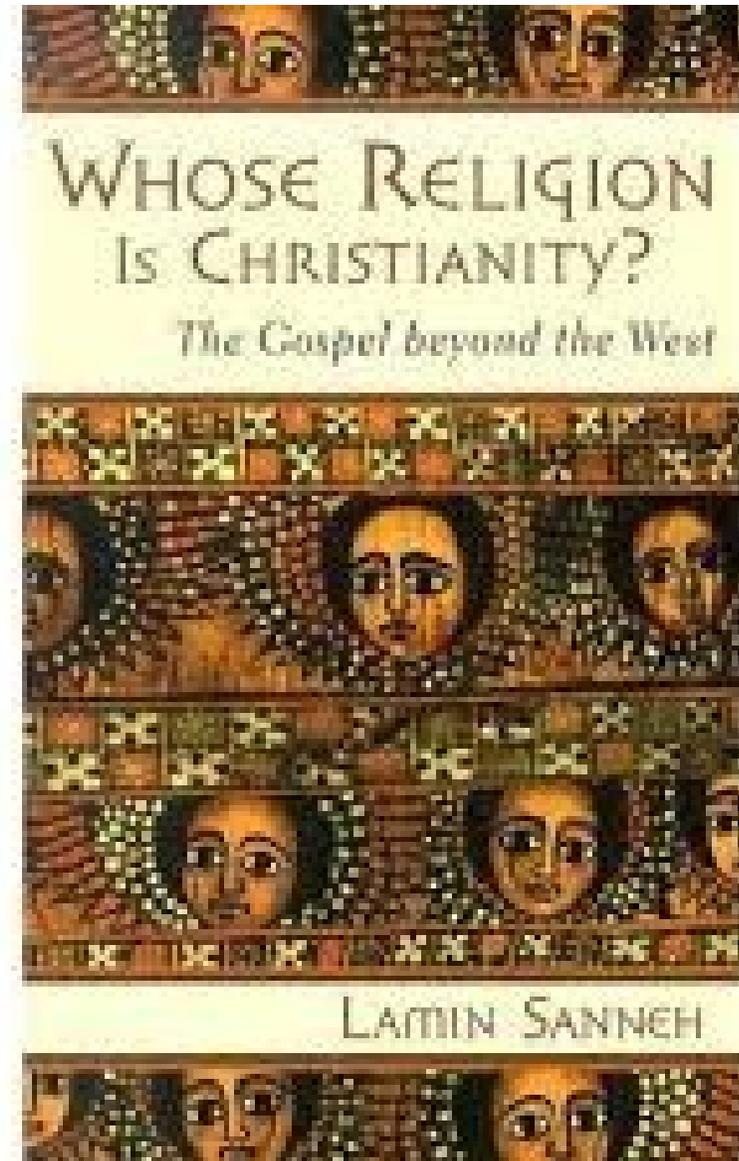


Lamin Sanneh (1942-2019)

- Prof. of Mission and World Christianity, Yale Divinity School
- Born in Gambia
- Studies in Birmingham, Beirut, London
- Converted to Christianity from Islam

# “Post-Western Christianity”

- “The contemporary confidence in the secular destiny of the West as an elevated stage of human civilization is matched by the contrasting evidence of the resurgence of Christianity as a world religion.”
- Proceeding in the global South without Western organizational structures, academic recognition, often in the context of political unrest and collapsing public institutions
- Accompanied by the rise of new religious movements in the cities of the North
- A “Post-Christendom” and post-Enlightenment reality





To counter the “skepticism”  
of the West

- “telling the whole story about the Christian religion cannot be limited to our own comfort zones of quiet piety and the rising influence of secularism”
- Sanneh’s starting point:
  - *Praxis and lived experience*
  - (the approach of liberation theologies [G. Gutierrez]; or contextual theologies [S. Bevans])

Harvey Cox: if many traditional systems of “belief” (propositions, affirmations) have collapsed; “faith” ( a deep seated confidence) has endured – ushering in a new “Age of the Spirit”

“myth” of *secularism*: science, literacy, education would dispel the “lie” of religion; reveal it as superstition, a quaint folk tradition

*Tectonic shift* in the nature of religiosity:

- *“the rediscovery of the transcendent in the immanent”*
- *“move to horizontal transcendence” – finding God in the ordinary, everyday*
- *Greater concern for “interiority”; “authenticity”; praxis*

# For a correct understanding of secularity

Religion is too pervasive to reduce it to a matter of personal piety (Western notion of secular state relegates religion to private sphere)

Christianity is a movement that transcends national, ethnic, cultural boundaries

Western “individualism” has roots in secular modernity’s valuing of “autonomy” – a reality modified by the communicative realities of cross-cultural encounter

Religious consciousness actually awakens us to the truth of our interdependence; our interconnectedness

Sanneh  
argues against  
“hard-edged  
secularism”

State authority seeks to subordinate religious authority

God is “privatized”; state becomes an object of worship

In response, religion became “countercultural”

Some Christian ideologies fail to accept a proper separation of church and state as a “safeguard” for genuine religious freedom

Argues *for* a  
“Soft”  
secularization

“Enshrined the role of conscience in matters of faith”

“established a limited role of government in society. In one move, religion was freed from the burden of public enforcement, and the government of divine entitlement”

permits the peaceful coexistence of a plurality of religions in one place

# Rethinking “mission” after era of Christendom

Western/Northern Christianity “exhausted itself” through “mission” activities

Recent introspection: recognition of damage done by triumphalist approaches, compromised with colonial project – focused more on the spread of European culture than on the gifts present in other cultures and expressions of faith

Widely held view today: Mission = “cultural imperialism”

New secular, pluralist world order – should not be compromised by the presence of exclusivist, intolerant forms of Christianity

## The expansion of Christianity in Africa comes *after* the end of colonialism

- Perhaps the presence of missionaries was an obstacle to growth (Christianity perceived as a “foreign” reality)
- Rapid growth happened when Africans themselves became the primary agents of evangelization
- Delays in translating the Bible into indigenous languages
- Christianity made inroads wherever it preserved indigenous names for God; in this way it is experienced as being in continuity with African traditional religions (not “morally superior”)



# “World” Christianity vs “Global” Christianity

## “Global Christianity:

- often taken to mean the geographical expansion of a European form
- experienced as “cultural captivity of faith”
- Bears the residue of “Christendom”; an anachronistic term

## World Christianity:

- A movement, taking shape in a multiplicity of cultures
- Expressed in the vernacular of local cultures and traditions
- Christianity is “not one thing,” but rather “a variety of idioms”

# Factors contributing to the demise of Christendom

Shift to native languages (from the imposition of colonial tongues)

Indigenizing of faith – “home rule”

Decolonizing of theology: birth of “contextual” theologies

(two world wars; decline of colonial empires – Great Britain, Spain, Germany, France, Belgium)



## Some implications of this shift

- Rise of Christianity in new cultures may provide us with new insight into the experience of the earliest Christian communities
- Some authors (e.g. Philip Jenkins) envision a “clash of civilizations,” argue for a new “crusade,” embrace an intolerant, counter-cultural form of Christianity, engage in a “naïve reverse missionizing of the “liberal West” – none of these are likely scenarios
- “world Christianity is unarmed, striking for its lack of political clout”