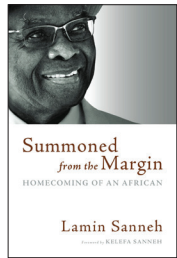


Book Reviews

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

—Reviewed by Karl J. Franklin



Lamin Sanneh is the D. Willis James Professor of World Christianity at Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. He has written widely on Islam, African Christianity, and the history of mission. This new autobiographical work reflects two polar perspectives that function much like two bookends with many other books in between. The first bookend (Part I) is mainly concerned about Islam, centered in Gambia where Sanneh grew up in a devout Muslim family. The second bookend (Part III) concerns his conversion to Catholicism and all the related polemics. Between the two bookends (Part II) are his rigorous and sometimes confusing academic and religious journeys. As Sanneh pointedly says, “This book is about my spiritual and intellectual journey, and tracks the path of my career from its unlikely beginnings in a traditional African Muslim society to its eventual culmination in the world of academia” (p. 19).

Chapter one of Part I, “What God Wills,” is Sanneh’s masterful brief history of Gambia and his story of how God’s will permeated everything in the society: “The statement ‘This is the accustomed way of doing things among us’ is the law of collective immunity... That is, it is the will of God” (p. 12). According to Sanneh, the manners, customs, duties and blessings of the sacred text allow Muslim people to have faith on the basis of perceived benefits. Money permeates the conversations, showing the materialistic nature of the Muslim religion.

Sanneh was challenged by the writings of Helen Keller to “burst the chains of my intellectual confinement” (p. 17), teaching him that education was the key to overcoming any handicaps he had. He had never seen a Bible and there was no church in his town—he never heard anyone preach or teach about Christianity: “More than a thousand years of Islamization had contributed to making Christianity virtually invisible to us” (p. 19). Helen Keller is but one of a long list of people and books that Sanneh refers to throughout his autobiography.

Chapter two, “Negotiating Childhood,” takes us into his polygamous household where “Children came in bunches and went out as confederates. In a crowded home with competing factions, life was a high-contact sport, and so it paid to forge alliances of the preemptive kind, with built-in checks and balances” (p. 24-25). But children learned that friends were more important than things and in Gambia women “would weep if they saw a child alone, even if not their own” (p. 26). Sanneh outlines the benefits and dangers of a family life that largely excludes the father, who had other wives to care for, and offspring learned that “those children who want to wear adult trousers must tie them at their throats” (p. 34).

“Second Wind” (chapter three) refers to Sanneh’s beginning “to live life from choice rather than on terms dictated by circumstances” (p. 63). He recounts how traditional festivals, circumcision, famine and Qur’an teaching were interwoven with his own curiosity about nature that “was leading to curiosity about God” (p. 60). He realized he would have to make choices and live life with risks because “I had to believe that the will of God left room to strive, to labor, and to embrace the reward” (p. 62). He began to live in hope and “was haunted by a sense of impending change in which I knew I had a meaningful role to play” (p. 63). He began to explore ways to bring it about.

Chapter four, “Exile at Home,” is an introspective view of how turning one’s back on one’s own religious language has negative outcomes. Arabic reigned supreme and “multilingual skills proved merely our addition to heathen tongues” (p. 71). Nevertheless, even at Armitage, his secondary school, Sanneh was able to find books, including *Pilgrim’s Progress*, *Vanity Fair*, and many others, that impressed and challenged him to believe that someday “I would visit other places, learn a new language, and make friends” (p. 80).

Chapter five, “Knocking on the Door” describes Sanneh’s somewhat torturous path to the Christian faith. He moves to Banjul, the colonial capital with amenities new to him—paved roads, phones, electricity, cars, an international airport, even the headquarters of Catholic and Protestant missions. He lodges with a Creole family who were practicing Anglicans but, due to mental and psychological conflict, moves to a one room apartment with a friend. During this time he is working for the government and begins to reassess the Christian religion. However, “What I observed of Christians did not make me stop and think” (p. 88). He believed that many Europeans had turned their backs on Christianity, so he fancied himself “a flag-bearer of Islam.” In general, the Bible’s exhortations seemed to make little difference to how Christians lived. In his own case, however, by musing on the life of the prophets he reasoned that “If God accepted Jesus’ suffering and failure, it would

require us to judge him and God by a different rule, thus giving hope to suffering humanity” (p. 90). Sanneh was in a quandary and reasoned that if Jesus’ suffering had divine merit, then Jesus would vindicate it by his ministry. Christianity was not what he was seeking “yet Christianity’s slain founder had risen from the grave and was threatening to pursue me in my thoughts. When and where might I find the answer?” (p. 97). Sanneh had let his guard down and during a stroll “the next thing I knew I was tumbling to my knees in prayer to Jesus, pleading, imploring, begging for God to forgive me, to accept me, to teach me, to help me—everything a child looks for” (p. 102).

Chapter six, “Challenged,” outlines the two challenges Sanneh faced: (1) to slip away from the old moorings of life without causing a storm and (2) to find a community of followers of Jesus (p. 103). Regarding the former he continued to respect and appreciate his Muslim friends. This proved somewhat difficult because “Muslims honor and celebrate their converts as trophies of faith, while Christians take their [Muslim] converts as charitable rations with a pinch of shame” (p. 105). In other words, “Christianity has the status of a lower caste in Muslim lands” (ibid). Sanneh soon found this out when he tried to join a Protestant church and be baptized. However, in a series of events over a period of time he was politely ignored by Catholics, Methodists, and even Presbyterians (in chapter 7), although he was baptized by a Methodist minister. At the end of his High School he was awarded a scholarship that took him to the U.S. Thus ends Part I, the bookend on his Muslim context.

Part II begins with chapter seven, “New World” (p. 125). Sanneh arrived in the U.S. in the middle of 1963, when the country was in the throes of political unrest, shortly culminating in the murders of Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. His comments on America as he experienced it are understandably somewhat negative. The focus on money, entertainment, feminism, profanity, Sunday as “hangover day,” musical lyrics, racial tensions, and affluence were puzzling to him. Sanneh enrolled at a college in Virginia but after one year, at the invitation of an academic colleague, moved to Union College in Schenectady, NY. His attempts to find a church community and fellowship were fraught with racial overtones, despite being accepted for some ministry at an Episcopal church. It was at Union, however, that he also had some support and mentoring that he might not have expected

there. (Union was chartered in 1795 during the French Enlightenment and “saw itself as a rampart against religion” (p. 139). The professors had no time for religion nor did many of the students either.) His studies at Union focused on the eighteenth-century abolitionist movement whereas most students were trying to find the easiest subjects to take so that they could finish college in the easiest manner. He decided to continue with Islamic Studies so that he could combine history and religion.

Chapter eight, “Intercontinental Vistas,” is a hectic record of Sanneh’s travels to Nigeria (studying Arabic), Gambia (to visit his father), Britain (Edinburgh and Birmingham Universities studying classical Arabic and Islam). He concludes that the academy has a particular approach to Islamic studies and that he “was hitting [his] head against a brick wall regarding the Western approaches to Islam” (p. 156).

Chapter nine, “Boomerang” begins with Sanneh’s return to Birmingham, England, where he interacts with an Anglican rector named Bryan. Bryan wants Sanneh “to stress the rarity of Muslim conversions” (p. 159), even though one of the officials of the church opposed his joining the Anglican church! There were some Anglicans who criticized the slowness of transferring control of the local churches to the Africans, but in general this was not the case. Sanneh enrolls at the University of Birmingham in the theology department and continues to study Arabic and Islam. In his advanced degree studies he realizes the “vehement controversy on the religious front, which expressed itself in Muslim opposition to the Western missionary movements” (p. 167). His next stop would be in Beirut for further studies in Arabic.

The title of Chapter ten, “Clipped Cedars” is a metaphorical reference to his time in Lebanon. At the time Lebanon was recognized “as a multicultural, multi-religious communal democratic system [that] made it an oddity in the region” (p. 175). Sanneh reports that a Muslim scholar once said “Muslims wish to dialogue, but they don’t know how, while Christians know how to dialogue, but they don’t wish to” (p. 178). A scholar with whom Sanneh had conversations pointed out that Muslim scholars regarded the Western colonial administration as infidels and therefore their ordinances “carried little weight unless they reflected Muslim demands” (p. 186). “The differential outcome of colonial rule was that Islam prospered while Christianity faltered. Christianity was quarantined.” (p. 187).

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The name of God can (and should be) a vernacular name. Sanneh declares, “I do not know of documented cases of Christian conversion occurring in societies where the indigenous name of God is unknown.” (p. 233)

Chapter eleven, “Beyond Jihad,” outlines Sanneh’s hands-on experience in West Africa where he worked with an organization that introduced “church leaders to the study of Islam and to a Christian theology of dialogue and mutual engagement” (p. 191). He notes that “The Muslims wanted vigorous debate, while the Christians seemed to be tiptoeing around the differences between the two faiths” (ibid). Christians seemed to ignore theology and rely on proof texts. During his work Sanneh “stumbled into the Suwairan pacifist tradition,” causing him to “wonder why jihadists allowed clerical pacifism at all, and how pacific clerics related to their jihad opponents” (p. 198). The significance of such Islamic pacific clerics is that it allowed dialogue on the basis of their shared heritage and faith such that “the earthly magistrate has no power to give or to withhold it” (p. 205).

The second bookend begins with Part III, Chapter twelve, “Native Tongue,” and is a powerful argument for the use of the vernacular, with his claim that “Christianity is a form of indigenous empowerment by virtue of vernacular translation” of the Bible (p. 217).

Chapter thirteen “Turning Point” continues the emphasis on the vernacular and takes place while Sanneh was at Harvard. The following are some of his observations on the native tongue in Bible translation: (1) it is unique as a missionary religion because it is not transmitted in the language of Jesus; (2) it is transmitted in a kind of “basic” Greek that is utilitarian; (3) it highlights the fact that the Qur’an is untranslatable in the vernacular because it thereby would have no canonical status; (4) the Muslim claim, therefore, is that translations must yield to the Qur’an and not displace it; and (5) the name for God can be (and should be) a vernacular name. In fact, Sanneh declares “I do not know of documented cases of Christian conversion occurring in societies where the indigenous name of God is unknown” (p. 233). His book, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (1989, 2009) is an earlier enlargement on these points.

In Chapter fourteen, “Homecoming,” Sanneh and his family move to Yale University where he has “a chance encounter with a colleague, Fr. Jerry, a Catholic priest” (p. 241). In retrospect, he notes that despite being a regular church attendee at Protestant churches, he was still treated as a visitor. Even at the Yale Divinity School he felt that “without a New England pedigree one was on a cultural watch list” (p. 243). Because of such attitudes Sanneh studied and wrote on issues that distinguished “between a cultural and a theological

reading of Christianity. I concluded that the cultural interpretation has become the dominant intellectual position” (p. 248). He believes such narrowness of thinking contributes to the self-interest of many Christians.

In “Rock of Ages” (Chapter fifteen) Sanneh converts to Catholicism—he considers it more as a natural conclusion to his journey—and moves to Washington, D.C. for his sabbatical. He observes the nature and interests of policy makers and the U.S. political system. However, he seems to be a Catholic with a difference: “Being Catholic does not assume anything about my cultural attainment, not even about whether I practice the Catholic faith, scandalous as that may sound” (p. 267).

Sanneh’s book is an autobiography that is also different: it does not tell us anything in depth about his wife, for example, although we know that she is a South African and competent in her own right. We know he has children and that Kelefa and his sister are accomplished professionals, but we don’t know anything about his family life that is not a part of his philosophical ruminations. In fact, we read in the preface that Kelefa “had only dimly perceived [of] the curiosity and restlessness that propelled my father out of the Gambia, and have propelled him ever since” (p. xii).

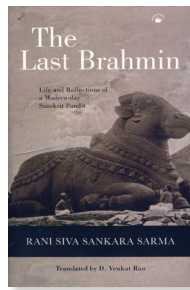
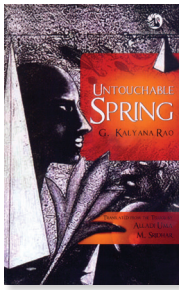
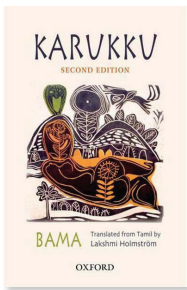
Despite the recorded discussions and deliberations with his academic colleagues, as well as in his other writings, it is not easy for the reader to know what kind of a person Sanneh is. This is partly because what he does reveal about his life, even when growing up as a Muslim in Gambia, takes place inside the perspective and story of a gifted academic.

Summoned from the Margin offers profound suggestions on a continuing and necessary dialogue between Christians and Muslims, with Sanneh showing sympathy toward the attitudes and concerns of both. We will have to wait and see what Protestant missionaries and churches have learned from his experiences.

Three Indian Vernacular Novels: *Karukku*, *Untouchable Spring*, and *The Last Brahmin: Life and Reflections of a Modern-day Sanskrit Pandit*

—Reviewed by H. L. Richard

Publishing continues to boom in India and English continues to be functionally the national language. Many important



works are published in the various regional languages, and the best of these are increasingly being brought out in English translation, primarily for Indian readership but with internationals enabled to listen in as well.

Karukku by Bama, second edition (translated from Tamil by Lakshmi Holmstrom), New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 142 + xxv.

K*arukku* by Bama must be given pride of place in this review of three important Indian novels. Bama is a Tamil Dalit woman and is considered the originator of the field of Tamil Dalit autobiography. Her story was written in Tamil in 1992, appeared in an English edition in 2000 and now a second English edition with new forewords appeared in 2012.

Bama's story of caste oppression is a bit unconventional, as it focuses on caste in the Roman Catholic Church. Bama overcame caste prejudice to receive an education, then became a nun in order to encourage other Dalits to move ahead in education. But she found the caste culture of the church to be stifling, so she left the convent to enter a frightening state of limbo.

The Tamil word in the title, *karukku*, means the sharply edged leaves of a palm tree. Bama explained the significance of this title in the preface to the first edition:

There are many congruities between the saw-edged and my own life. Not only did I pick up the scattered *palmyra karukku* in the days when I was sent out to gather firewood, scratching and tearing my skin as I played with them, but later they also became the embryo and symbol that grew into this book.

The driving forces that shaped this book are many: events that occurred during many stages of my life, cutting me like *karukku* and making me bleed; unjust social structures that plunged me into ignorance and left me trapped and suffocating; my own desperate urge to break away, throw away, destroy these bonds; and when the chains were shattered into fragments, the blood that was spilt—all these taken together....

Although the author of *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (New Testament) described the Word of God as a two-edged sword, it no longer stirs the hardened hearts of many who have sought their happiness by enslaving and disempowering others.

In order to change this state of affairs, all Dalits who have been deprived of their basic rights must function as God's word, piercing to the very heart. Instead of being more and more beaten down and blunted, they must unite, think about their rights, and battle for them. (pp. xxiii-xxiv)

This review cannot do justice to such a powerful book, which has received both Indian and international awards. Anyone involved with Indian Christianity, which is primarily Dalit, needs to read and feel the pain that comes through this outstanding work.

Untouchable Spring by G. Kalyana Rao (translated from Telugu by Alladi Uma and M. Sridhar), Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2010, pp. 285 + vii.

This remarkable novel traces multiple generations of Dalit life in the southeastern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, presented as the oral recollections of an elderly woman telling what she had heard from her husband. The oral style at times gets a bit complicated, with the weaving of various generations of the tales, but the message comes through with great power.

Official Brahminical culture and history are harshly critiqued through the first hero of the tales, a gifted village artist who left the oppression of village life to be a wandering minstrel (each generation's story is remarkable in its own way). This artist's son converted to Christianity in the great famine when people movements to Christ stirred among the Mala and Madiga Dalit castes. (Mission records were used as background to these stories, which claim to be genuinely autobiographical of this Dalit Christian author.) The central story-teller in the book is Ruth, the wife of Reuben, the son of the first convert. Reuben is introduced amidst a caste-based atrocity and the story of oppression runs on from generation to generation. Reuben became a pastor in the mission hospital and made a happy life with Ruth. Their daughter Rosy married into the church and proceeded to court international contacts through the leadership of church and mission. But Reuben considered Rosy and her husband to be like Judas, and broke all relationship with them.

The generational story continues as Reuben and Ruth's son Immanuel turns to violence in the fight against caste oppression, and suffers a violent death. Rosy's daughter Ruby followed her grandfather Reuben out of the church, and in a fresh revolutionary mode, married Immanuel's son. Reuben dies tormented by the history of his people, and Ruth's own relation to this agonizing narrative is captured in a couple of sentences: "... Ruth says that her memory is not past. She says it is an untouchable spring" (p. 5).

For anyone wanting to feel the depth of Dalit stirrings in India today this book is highly recommended. The message

What it means to be Brahmin, what Hinduism is or should be, what lies ahead for traditional Indian culture, are crucial questions just below the surface of this impressive novel.

of the irrelevance of institutional Christianity and the appeal of violence is deeply troubling, but is best faced and grappled with in candid detail. A brief but very instructive concluding note by the translators situates this work in relation to Telugu literature and other Dalit writings (including Bama, reviewed just above), especially with reference to the problematic support of armed struggle and the right of non-Dalit translators to be involved with this type of publication.

The Last Brahmin: Life and Reflections of a Modern-day Sanskrit Pandit by Rani Siva Sankara Sarma (translated from Telugu by D. Venkat Rao), Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2012; pp. 197 + vii.

The last Brahmin is the father of the narrator of this story. The narrator is thoroughly modern and has little respect for traditional Brahminical ways, seeing egalitarianism as a superior ideology. The last Brahmin's worldview is especially highlighted in comparison with that of his oldest son, the elder brother of the narrator. The elder brother had converted to Hinduism, abandoning the true Brahminical tradition of the last Brahmin.

The opening paragraphs of chapter 8 illustrate this point.

Recently, a friend of mine told me of an incident which had fascinated him; he had read it in a book. That fifty-page book, written by Perugu Rami Reddy from Aditya Nagar of Karnool, has the title *Are Brahmins Hindus?* The incident that fascinated my friend is as follows.

Once, the writer was travelling from Rayalaseema to Konaseema. At Ravulapalem, some people helped an aged Vedic pandit to get into the bus. He came and sat next to the writer in the bus. Watching the pandit's clothing and appearance, the writer, just to begin a conversation, asked him, "Are you a Hindu?" "No! Can't you tell I am a Brahmin?" said the old man. "Aren't Brahmins Hindus?" asked the writer. "No. True, some say that there is something called 'Hindu religion' or 'Hinduism.' But this term, this so-called Hinduism, is nowhere to be found in the Vedas or Puranas or anywhere else. I am surely only a Brahmin," said the Veda pandit. (p. 45)

The last Brahmin remained true to the old tradition ("the ancient order") of teaching Sanskrit from pandit to student. He was deeply dismayed by the betrayal of his eldest son, also an expert in Sanskrit, into Hinduism. He was less concerned about the younger son, the narrator, who was never a good student.

The last Brahmin views the centuries of Islamic rule of India quite passively; Brahminism was allowed to flourish with its traditional pattern of teaching. It was the colonial era that brought the great disruption into Brahminical life. The newly developed monstrosity of Hinduism wants to homogenize and promote Brahminical ways among non-Brahmins. This is a total violation of "the ancient order."

With fascinating reflections and interactions among the varying worldviews of the family, the problems of modernity, Hinduism and Brahminism are powerfully portrayed. This novel takes one to the opposite end of the social spectrum of the two Dalit novels also reviewed here, but it shows that the crisis of identity is widespread in modern India (as indeed across the world). What it means to be Brahmin, what Hinduism is or should be, what lies ahead for the traditional Indian culture, are crucial questions just below the surface of this impressive novel.

The knowledge explosion of the modern world presents massive challenges for those who wish to remain broadly informed across cultures and fields of study. The growth of English as an international language now opens up, through translation, insights into vernacular visions that otherwise remain isolated except for the multi-lingual.

The reviews here only scratch the surface of a rich source of cultural learning, a source that must be seriously engaged by those who wish to develop a deep understanding of India. **IJFM**