

Reflecting on Pentecost in the United States in Light of World Christianities

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Some Basic Definitions

Let's begin with some basic definitions. For the purpose of this essay I will be using Lamin Sanneh's terminology for describing and referring to the current situation of the Christian religion worldwide.¹ Sanneh uses the term global Christianity referring to the churches of the North or Western worlds, formerly known in missionary circles as the "sending" churches. World Christianity refers to the churches of the South and East, formerly known in missionary circles as "receiving" or "younger" churches. For Sanneh, global Christianity points to a "replication of Christian forms and patterns developed in Europe," while world Christianity "is the movement of Christianity as it takes form and shape in societies that previously were not Christian, societies that had no bureaucratic tradition with which to domesticate the gospel. Consequently for Sanneh world Christianity is not one thing, but a variety of indigenous responses through more or less effective local idioms, but in any case without necessarily the European Enlightenment frame."²

Some scholars of Christian studies find these terms too simplistic, dismissing the complex historical processes of transmission, reception, and re-appropriation of the Christian religion not only worldwide, but also in the old established centers of Christendom—Europe, United States, and Canada. I personally prefer to use the term global Christianities or world Christianities since they project a plurality of expressions which emerge out of the contextual character of the Christian religion. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this essay, let's keep the definitions simple and to the point: global Christianity (GC) refers to the old Western "sending" churches and world Christianity (WC) refers to the old "receiving" churches.

The Demographic Shift and New Awareness of the Movement of Christianity

There is a growing awareness of the demographic shift of the Christian population in the world (see table below). According to the *World Christian Encyclopedia* and the *Atlas of Global Christianity*,³ early in the twentieth century most of the Christian population was located in Europe and North America. Currently the Christian population has shifted to Africa, Asia, Latin America, including the Caribbean, and the Pacific. The projections for the year 2050, as the table below indicates, continues to place the growth and vitality of the Christian religion in the Southern and Eastern Hemispheres—the context for world Christianity (WC) as defined above. In fact, the projections for 2100 are staggering as Christianity is expected to grow rapidly in these regions and in certain areas of Europe and North America, due to immigration from world Christianity's context to global Christianity's context.⁴

However, what these statistical and geographical studies of the Christian religion are showing is much more than just the current demographic shift. For example, from 33 to 923 CE most of the Christians of the world belonged to the WC regions, in this particular case Africa, Asia minor, and farther East. Between 923-1981 CE there is

a dramatic shift from the southern regions of WC to the northern regions of global Christianity (GC), 1500 CE marking the lowest point of Christians from the regions of WC. Yet, from the 1950s the statistics point to the growing number of Christians in the regions of WC—again! Todd Johnson and Sun Young Chung state,

Around 1970, in an equally stunning development, the Christian centre of gravity turned back east (still moving south) for the first time since AD 600. This was due largely to the rise of Christianity in the tropical countries of Africa and Latin America (south) and in Asia, particularly in China and in India (east). Shortly after 1980 Christians in the south outnumbered those in the North for the first time in 1000 years.⁵

One statistical interpretation, therefore, is that most of Christianity's history is located in non-Western regions. We cannot forget that even during the historical period where the centers of Christianity were located in Northern/Western Europe, there was some kind of activity—missional, war-like, theological debates, etc.—where the non-Western regions had a role in the development of Christianity—in their own context or afar.

Region	Christian Population 1900	Christian Population 1995	Christian Population 2000	Projected % Christian Population 2050
Africa	9.9 million	318 million	360 million	24%
Asia	22 million	282 million	313 million	18%
Europe	381 million	557 million	560 million	21%
Latin America	62 million	445 million	481 million	25%
North America	79 million	251 million	260 million	12%

What Are the Implications of the Growth of World Christianity to Global Christianity Christians?

I am frequently asked to preach about the topic of world Christianity. In a 15-20 minute sermon I am expected to provide a Christian community with the complex historical and theological developments of world Christianity and juxtapose it with global Christianity. This is not an easy task. Yet pastors and congregations seek resources to help their communities see the current situation of the Christian religion, the current situation of their faith in other parts of the world. They are seeking connections between their faith and the faith of others; they seek to discover the character of the body of Christ.

Consequently, I want to answer the above question thinking about the ministry of preaching in a local Christian community in the United States. Instead of providing the reader with detailed historical, theological, and missiological implications, I want to focus on the preacher as a cross-cultural conversation partner. Therefore, I want to address one frequently dismissed role in preaching ministry: the art of cross-cultural communication.

Before we look at the implications, let me first share with you an important pedagogical and communication tool: *people can only learn new things through what they already know*. Our congregants are not “blank slate” individuals who will receive information as a hard drive receives information in a computer. In fact, you can add

all kinds of information to a hard drive, but if the operative system of the computer does not know “how” to use it, it will just occupy space. This is also true for human beings. We can “receive” and “store” information which has no use. Consequently, when teaching or preaching about world Christianity, it is crucial to find the points of connection—how to communicate something new with something that our congregants already know?

Let me offer two insights: (1) Scripture and (2) Music/Hymnody. Scripture is a great source for our communities to be exposed to and understand the current dynamics of world Christianity. Seek for Scriptures that point to cultural and religious tensions. I frequently use Acts 10 as a text that shows a cross-cultural and cross-religious dynamic which generates two different expressions of the emerging Christian faith. While we seldom talk about polygamy in Scriptures, this is an important topic since, for example, some of the most interesting theological and ecclesial debates in Africa and Asia are related to the question of Christian family—monogamous or polygamous.

Meanings in translations generate interesting and complicated debates in world Christianity. What kind of term does a Christian community use for God? Even today Christians in China continue to debate the appropriate term to refer to God. Grass-roots communities use daily idiomatic expressions to address God, and some of these expressions ambiguously connect with Scriptural stories. One way in which I try to help global Christians understand these complexities is by using multiple translations in English. I also ask people to share with me ways in which they “name” God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, helping them connect their own idiomatic expressions with those in the world Christianity regions.

Music and hymnody also provide beautiful sermon entry points. Mainline Protestant churches’ hymnals provide many examples of music and lyrics from around the world. Moreover, rhythms create different environments. Life rhythmic music generates joy and enthusiasm; it creates a context of “difference” that is permeable to learning new things. Solemn and contrast music usually generate an environment of inquiry and openness. I have seen global Christians’ suspicion and curiosity turned into genuine inquiry and thoughtful reflection when exposed to a world Christianity hymn with a bolero rhythm that carries deep erotic divine meaning. Frequently I get a global Christian name Saint Teresa de Avila or Saint John of the Cross or even Sufi Muslims as a connecting point with Latin American erotic Christian expressions.

The first implication of the growth of world Christianity is that Christians from global Christianity *learn* the contextual constellation of sources that inform and shape the daily life experience of world Christianity Christians. From different rhythms, cultural and religious linguistic expressions that are Christianized to testimonies of God’s grace and power, world Christianity Christians offer a new grammar, a new musical score, a new configuration of power to global Christianity Christians. What may seem superstitious, magical, and traditional for global Christianity Christians are grounding sources where the gospel of Jesus Christ, embodied in world Christianity Christians, interacts and generates meaning, challenges evil and injustice, and offers hope in a context of uncertainty and poverty. *Global Christianity Christians can learn the many cultural and religious resources that shape world Christianity.*

A second implication of the growth of world Christianity is that global Christianity Christians *discover* Jesus’ activity in the daily life experience and expectations

of world Christianity Christians. World Christianity grows and lives in a context of extreme poverty. Pentecostal and independent Christian communities abound in *favelas* and poor urban communities. Christian communities also grow in villages and in the rural areas. Poverty and faith have a synergy that challenges assumptions of faith and wealth in the global Christianity contexts. The daily life experience of being poor and Christian translates into the public domain not as philanthropy or benevolence, but as a pillar of survival. For example, the confession “Jesus is my healer” takes a very different connotation in a context where there are no medical resources. “Jesus is my healer” is not just a statement of confession or an assertion of biblical faith. “Jesus is my healer” is an expectation of faith, framed in an eschatological life style where the intervention of Jesus as healer is expected, Jesus as healer is tested through the healing of an ill person. The confession is witnessed, and as a result, the community participates and embodies the power of Jesus’ healing. Paradoxically, when healing fails, faith is not lost, but rather failure is usually explained as the battle of good against evil. Faith is not always about winning, but faith is always in a state of test, theology is always generative! *Global Christianity Christians discover Jesus’ activity in the daily life experience and expectations of world Christianity Christians.*

A third implication of the growth of world Christianity is that global Christianity Christians *realize* that Christian identity is shaped by other religious forces and not determined by an “us-them” religious mentality. World Christianity’s contexts are religiously pluralistic; world Christianity’s *habitat* is cultural and religious diversity. Although there is a tendency in the United States and Europe to emphasize the situations where world Christianity Christians find themselves at odds with people of other faiths, in fact most world Christianity Christians live their lives with people of other faiths. Their identities are shaped by different modes of relating to people of other faiths. Plurality of faiths and the offer of different alternative religious options—Christian evangelization—are not perceived as imposing the faith on others. Also, faith is not watered-down for the sake of cross-cultural religious encounters. Perhaps Kwame Bediako’s statement poignantly clarifies this implication:

In this connection, so far as religious engagement in a pluralistic setting is concerned, the modern West has less to offer than may be readily recognized. There are two main reasons for this. The prolonged experience of Christendom in the West meant that Western Christian thought lacked the regular challenge to establish its conceptual categories in relation to alternative religious claims, while the secularized environment that followed the Enlightenment has tended to suggest that specifically religious claims are no longer decisive. As a result of this two-fold handicap, the encounter with religious pluralism may lead to either religious polarization or else the diminishing of religious convictions.... The African field presents some rather distinctive features with regard to Christian expansion. In the majority of cases, the expansion has taken place in the presence of other religious faiths. This situation has compelled modern African Christian thought also to establish its categories in the interface of African Christian convictions in the one hand, and the local alternatives, in particular the perennial spiritualities of African primal religious traditions on the other.⁶

A combination of the historical legacy of Western Christendoms and our current free market economy shapes the encounter of religions in terms of defiance and competition. Yet, most world Christianity Christians live their faith in terms of relationships that are not shaped by the historical forces of Western Christendoms and competitive religious alternatives. The relationships that shape Christian identities—notice it is not one identity, but many—in world Christianity regions point to a woman’s womb, where multiple nutrients, discharges, genetic material, blood, etc. are processed through many molecular and biological boundaries, shaping and sustaining life until its birth. Consequently, a third implication is that *Global Christianity Christians realize that Christian identity is shaped by other religious forces and not determined by an “us-them” religious mentality.*

Conclusions

I have offered the reader the following resources: (1) definitions of terms that can help understand the difference between mainline Christian communities in the United States and the growing and vital expressions of Christianity in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Pacific; (2) a general survey of the demographic shift of the Christian religion pointing to the important fact that Christianity has never left the contexts of the Southern and Eastern Hemispheres, challenging the assumption of Christianity as a predominant Western religion; (3) one pedagogical tool of communication: one can only learn new things through what we already know; (4) three implications coming from world Christianity Christians to global Christianity Christians; and following, (5) my conclusions.

All of the implications point to learning opportunities that global Christianity Christians have. Perhaps the biggest challenge that we face is at the level of mindset: *Can US Christians learn and cross-culturally engage these lessons from our world Christianity Christians?* We have inherited a “sending” and “resolving” mentality that creates resistance to *learning* from those who we believe have no true faith because they do not live like we do or have the religious structures that we have. Our incredible surprises from these lessons—and I’ve seen global Christianity Christians surprised by what they are learning from world Christianity Christians—tend to be suppressed and domesticated as soon as what we know filters what we are learning. It just goes back to a lesson from Scriptures: “Nathaniel said to him: ‘Can anything good come from Nazareth?’” (John 1:46b).

Pastors and congregational leaders have a two-fold challenge. We face the incredible opportunity to *re-discover* our faith anew by way of our sisters and brothers of the world Christianity regions and to re-visit our cultural and religious sources, to find Jesus in our daily public life, and to learn that our Christian identity does not have to be shaped and determined by an antagonistic approach to cultures and religions.

We also face the challenge of disrupting an old demonic lesson: if it comes from Africa, Asia, Latin America, or the Pacific, it is less than real, is deficient, and it needs our help.

As we prepare to preach during Pentecost, we are reminded of the miracle of language and idiomatic expressions of the divine. We are reminded of the work of the Holy Spirit as she broke linguistic barriers and generated a cross-cultural communication dynamic that pushed the gospel from its inner circles, from its old centers, to unexpected places. The Christian experience and theological reflections from those

unexpected spaces shaped the character of Christianity worldwide. We are living in a similar situation. What do we do as preachers and leaders to give meaning to this demographic shift of the Christian religion and its theological vitality? Living in such a global network of communication makes accessible the experiences, the conversations, the settings for learning. In a context where racism, classism, ethnocentricity, and Western power continue to shape our faith, making these experiences become sources for our own theological and discipleship growth is the most demanding task. May God help us!

Notes

- 1 Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity: The Gospel Beyond the West*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 22.
- 2 Ibid. One of Sanneh's arguments for this distinction was the use of the vernacular in transmitting the gospel, especially in regards to the translation of scripture.
- 3 *The World Christian Encyclopedia* (Cambridge University Press), 14-16, and *Atlas of Global Christianity*, edited by Todd M. Johnson and Kenneth R. Ross, (Edinburgh University Press—Center for the Study of Global Christianity, 2009), 48-57.
- 4 Johnson & Ross, *Atlas of Global Christianity*, 52.
- 5 Johnson & Young Chun, in Johnson & Ross, *Atlas of Global Christianity*, 50.
- 6 Kwame Bediako, "Whose Religion Is Christianity? Reflections on Opportunities and Challenges in Christian Theological Scholarship: The African Dimension," in *Mission in the 21st Century: Exploring the Five Marks of Global Mission*, eds. Andrew Walls & Cathy Ross (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2008), 109.