CONGRUENCY, CONFLICT OR DIALOGUE:
Lamin Sanneh on the relation between gospel and culture

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In the third week of May 1994 the Gambian Daily Observer published a quartet of articles on 'one of The Gambia’s most distinguished academics, Lamin Sanneh'. The occasion was the publication of Sanneh’s latest book *Encountering the West* which deals with another aspect of one of Sanneh’s specialisms: intercultural hermeneutics. Sanneh in earlier articles and books has focussed on the cultural exchanges occurring in the mission fields; in his newest work he makes a shift to the Western World, analyzing the relation between gospel and culture and offering suggestions for a renewed public role of Christianity in Europe and North America.

In this article we want to discuss Sanneh’s theology of intercultural hermeneutics. We will commence with some prolegomena on Sanneh’s definition of the terms ‘culture’ and ‘gospel’, which will be followed by a discussion of Sanneh’s ideas about culture in a Christian perspective. Then we will see what consequences, both practical and theological, this view has had for the encounter between the gospel and African indigenous cultures — Sanneh has some quite refreshing and unusual ideas about the role of mission — and how in the West it has come to privatization of religion and its subordination to culture. Towards the end we will study some of Sanneh’s suggestions for the direction of World Christianity and see how his idea of Christianity as a fundamentally pluralistic religion plays an essential role herein. We will conclude by making some general and evaluative remarks.

1 Lamin Ousman Sanneh was born in Georgetown/The Gambia in 1942. He was raised a Muslim but at the age of 18 converted to Christianity. He studied history and islamics, among other places, in England, the Middle East and the United States and taught in several African countries. Presently he is professor of Missions and World Christianity at Yale Divinity School.

Apart from a wide range of articles Sanneh published four books:
1990 *Translating the Message: the missionary impact on culture* (New York 1990)
1993 *Encountering the West; Christianity and the global cultural process: the African dimension* (New York 1993)

A fifth book, which deals with Islam in West-Africa being a sort of counterpart to *West African Christianity* is in the process of being published at the moment.

2 The words pluralism and pluralistic in this article refer to the diversity of forms and interpretations within Christianity.
Defining culture

Certain words are so common that hardly anyone takes the trouble of defining them, assuming that the reader will know what is meant. The terms ‘culture’ and ‘religion’ fall into this category. However, when challenged to give a precise description, things turn out to be slightly different. Sanneh, in *Encountering the West*, spends a paragraph to describe his ideas with regard to the concept of ‘culture’.\(^3\) He associates himself with the general understanding of culture as ‘having to do with the customary beliefs, social forms and material traits of a racial, religious or social group’. Adding to this definition he particularly stresses the importance of language and religion within culture, underlining that culture fundamentally has something to do with moral commitment and striving towards perfection.\(^4\) This leads to the conclusion that culture is a dynamic concept: rather than a state of being, culture is a process of growth and development of a specifically defined group.

With regard to the term ‘religion’ Sanneh is less precise. He doesn’t give any definition as such and — rather confusingly — often interchanges words like ‘gospel’, ‘Christianity’ and ‘religion’.\(^5\) However, reading through his publications we can make some remarks. Religion, as we have just seen, is in the first place a subcategory of culture. Although it is part of culture, Sanneh indicates that it cannot be reduced to culture only. Religion transcends culture and finds moral and ethical values from a source elsewhere, affirming an overall divine plan with human history, stimulating humanity’s strive for perfection and progression. However, although Sanneh advocates that it is exactly this ‘surplus’ that can and should be interculturally transmitted, it is not possible to extract this intrinsic power from culture and have a sort of essence of religion in a pure and supra-cultural shape. Religion does not exist apart from its cultural forms and hence has to be transmitted and translated within its cultural robe.\(^6\)

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\(^3\) It is worth noting that Sanneh in *Encountering the West* gives some clues as to what he understands by the concept culture. In *Translating the Message*, where the notion of culture plays a crucial role, a definition was missing, which has led to quite a lot of criticism. The discussion of the term ‘culture’ can be found in *Encountering the West*, p. 26-28.

\(^4\) In a later stage of the article, when discussing the relation between gospel and culture in the West, we shall explore Sanneh’s conviction that culture is basically a moral issue. We will see that he, in his analysis of the contemporary Western understanding of culture, points out that this moral element has disappeared from culture during the period of the Enlightenment, which — he diagnoses — is the reason why religion has disappeared from the public stage.

\(^5\) In *Translating the Message* Sanneh defines Christianity as ‘a religious movement, or as a vernacular translation movement, in contradiction to Christianity either as Scripture or as a dogmatic, creedal system...’ (p. 7), but in *Encountering the West* these views are not repeated.

\(^6\) In his paper ‘Gospel and culture: ramifying effects of scriptural translation’, in: P.C. Stine (ed.), *Bible translation and the spread of the church: the last two hundred years*, Leiden