Long the dominant religion of the West, Christianity is now rapidly becoming the principal faith in much of the postcolonial world—a development that marks a momentous shift in the religion’s very center of gravity. In this eye-opening book, Lamin Sanneh examines the roots of this “post-Western awakening” and the unparalleled richness and diversity, as well as the tension and conflict, it has brought to World Christianity.

Tracing Christianity’s rise from its birth on the edge of the Roman empire—when it proclaimed itself to be a religion for the entire world, not just for one people, one time, and one place—to its key role in Europe’s maritime and colonial expansion, Sanneh sheds new light on the ways in which post-Western societies in Africa, Asia, and Latin America were drawn into the Christian orbit. Ultimately, he shows, these societies outgrew Christianity’s colonial forms and restructured it through their own languages and idioms—a process that often occurred outside, and sometimes against, the lines of denominational control. The effect of such changes, Sanneh contends, has been profound, transforming not only worship, prayer, and the interpretation of Scripture, but also art, aesthetics, and music associated with the church. In exploring this story of Christianity’s global expansion and its current resurgence in the non-Western world, Sanneh pays close attention to such issues as the faith’s encounters with Islam and indigenous religions, as well as with secular ideologies such as Marxism and nationalism. He also considers the challenges that conservative, non-Western forms of Christianity pose to Western liberal values and Enlightenment ideas.

Here then is a groundbreaking study of Christianity’s role in cultural innovation and historical change—and must reading for all who are concerned with the present and future of the faith.
Disciples of All Nations opens with a look at the New Testament sources of Jewish and Gentile communities, and at Paul as architect of the Gentile church and integration of Jewish and Gentile communities. Right from the start the Christian movement encountered Greek culture, which began the process of the religion’s Hellenization.

Chapter 1: Whither Christianity? A Study in Origin, Thought, and Action

This chapter examines the course of the Christian movement in the Roman Empire and pays particular attention to Tertullian as Christian apologist. Persecution caused adjustments in Christian life and ideas, and led to the creation of new social organizations that promoted Christian philanthropy and civic virtue. A diversity of tongues and races converted to the new religion, creating social pluralism and a diversity of cultural styles. Believers were spread in towns and cities as well as in rural districts. There were communities of believers in many places, including Arabia, Egypt, Carthage, Nubia, Ethiopia as well as places on the Silk Route. In northern England and Iceland, Christians used the vernacular to propagate the faith. Charlemagne was a strong promoter of vernacular translation, and the mission of Constantine-Cyril and Methodius also gave strong impetus to vernacular education and scholarship. Christians such as Tertullian and Augustine brought a purposeful understanding to the meaning of history, which scholars describe as the Augustinian worldview. One central feature of that worldview is the connection between salvation and history.

Questions for Discussion

1) What Jewish characteristics can you identify in the rise of Christianity?
2) What effects did the Roman Empire have on Christianity?
3) What meaning did Christians give to philanthropy?
4) Summarize the main points of Tertullian’s defense of Christianity.
5) Give specific examples of the role of translation in Christianity.
6) What features would you identify in the spread of Christianity to Egypt and Ethiopia?
7) What strikes you about the introduction of Christianity in northern England?
8) What were some of the reasons for the conversion of Iceland?
Chapter 2: The Comparative Pillar: The Christian Movement in Islamic Perspective

Pages 57-88

Charismatic ideas were prominent in the spread of Christianity, with the gifts of the spirit seen as signs of new life. Persecution exerted great pressure on communities of faith; sometimes persecution was a setback, forcing Christians to retreat and to go underground out of fear for their lives, and sometimes persecution was a stimulus when Christians showed courage in the face of suffering and death, thereby attracting more believers to the church. In some cases the Christian movement failed to gain a stronghold, as was the case with the mission to the Arabs. But in other areas Christian mission succeeded, as happened in Egypt where the monastic momentum rose and spread. Axum and Nubia were also evangelized before they came under Islamic control. Syriac Christianity flourished and was a force for cultural survival following the rise of Islam. Impact of Greek science and ideas sparked the short-lived Islamic enlightenment. Scholars from minority Jewish and Christian communities played a key role in translating and transmitting Greek philosophical and scientific works. A brief period of interfaith encounter and engagement ensued before the cultural stalemate that led up to the Crusades.

Questions for Discussion

1) Why was religious persecution carried out against the Christians?
2) How did Christians explain their suffering?
3) What reasons can you give for why Christianity failed to gain a stronghold among the Arabs?
4) Can you name some of the Arab Christian leaders?
5) What were some of the objections of Muslims to Christianity?
6) How did Christians answer these objections?
7) What accounted for the Islamic enlightenment and how would you describe it?
8) What role did monasteries play in the spread of Christianity?
9) What role did minorities play in the Muslim world?
Chapter 3: Old World Precedents and New World Directions: The Trans-Atlantic Pillar

Pages 89-130

The expansion of Muslim power led to the confinement of Europe in the eastern and southern Mediterranean, prompting the move to embark on maritime exploration of Spain and Portugal. Spanish and Portuguese colonization mission to the New World had tragic consequences for native populations whose response was quite complex. A conversion movement among Mexican peasants in the sixteenth century was centered on the cult of Our Lady of Guadalupe that became the country’s national shrine. Catholic missionary expansion in Asia and Africa occurred also under the patronage of Spain and Portugal, and in Africa mission was closely connected with slavery and with other aspects of Portugal’s commercial interests. But taking African slaves diminished the number of potential converts to Christianity, and when the slave trade declined it also made it economically non-viable to send missions. Demands from African leaders led Rome in 1620 to create Propaganda Fide to take charge of Catholic missions rather than continue to rely on imperial sponsorship. Propaganda Fide provided the impetus for the petition of the Afro-Brazilian, Lourenço da Silva de Mendouça, to petition the Curia in Rome in 1686 to condemn the slave, which the pope did. The antislavery movement picked up steam in the course of the eighteenth century, with New World Africans, including American blacks, playing a major role toward abolition. Protestant missions were born out of this antislavery ferment, resulting in the outreach to Sierra Leone and Nigeria, among other places. Freed slaves, called Nova Scotians because of their port of embarkation, and Africans recaptured from the slave ships on the high seas, called recaptives, were settled in free colonies in West Africa and used as the spearhead of a modernization movement to transform Africa. These recaptives formed the basis of creating a society free of servitude.

Questions for Discussion

1) How did the rise of Islam affect control of the Mediterranean?
2) Give some reasons for why Spain and Portugal embarked on overseas maritime expansion.
3) Evaluate the methods used in evangelization of New Spain.
4) What role in Mexican Christianity would you give to Our Lady of Guadalupe?
5) How did early Catholic missions in South Asia see their role there?
6) What was the relationship between mission and the slave trade?
7) Can you explain why Rome created Propaganda Fide?
8) Who was Lourenço da Silva de Mendouça?
9) Who were the Nova Scotians and what was their role in West Africa?
10) What role did recaptives play in the mission to Nigeria?
Chapter 4: The Yogi and the Commissar

Pages 131-162

The events marking the beginnings of colonial rule in Nigeria were the spur for Protestant missions, indicating not just that missions were arms of colonial control, but that they viewed their role as one of modernizing traditional societies by overthrowing indigenous structures and institutions. Yet the path of missions and colonialism alike was impeded by projects of Bible translation and the long-term strengthening of the vernacular cultural impulse. The vernacular Bible was a catalyst for rising mother-tongue confidence whose unpredictable effects were evident in Church, school, and society. Albert Schweitzer’s medical mission in Gabon was set up to bypass the idea of fostering local initiative in a church for Africans, but it left his medical mission without a root in the society. David Livingstone took a different path by committing to the cause of African advancement through the career of Charles Domingo, an early nationalist prototype. African nationalism found in Cecil Rhodes and settler politics in Zimbabwe a target for criticism, and individuals as different as al-Jabarti of Egypt, Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, and Cheikh Hamidou Kane of Senegal gave voice to objections to European intrusion into Africa. In Charles de Foucauld and Louis Massignon, however, we have examples of Europeans who accepted the part of mutual intercultural respect and engagement and who may be regarded as one fruit of the encounter of peoples and civilizations.

Questions for Discussion

1) What was the relationship between mission and colonialism in Nigeria?
2) Describe the role of Bible translation in the spread of Christianity in Nigeria?
3) How did vernacular literacy contribute to African education?
4) Who was Albert Schweitzer and what were his ideas about mission?
5) Who was David Livingstone and what was his significance for mission in Africa?
6) Describe Charles Domingo and his role in mission and African education.
7) Who was Cecil Rhodes and what ideas did he bring to Africa?
8) How did al-Jabarti explain the coming of the French to Egypt?
9) What lessons did Cheikh Hamidou Kane draw from French rule in Senegal?
10) Describe the approach of Charles de Foucauld and Louis Massignon in relations with Islam.
11) How would you describe Jomo Kenyatta’s view of Christianity in the struggle for African independence?
Chapter 5 discusses the Pietist distrust of government as background to nationalist agitation and charismatic awakening that provided the impetus to rise of African Independent Churches (AICs). Mojola Agbebi of Nigeria was a prominent figure in the nationalist African response to missionary control. At the other end of the continent charismatic and nationalist ideas sparked the East African Revival. The chapter looks at the similarities between Nova Scotian charismatic spirituality and the heartfelt style of emerging charismatic and Pentecostal churches. Martin Delany promoted the nationalist cause and was a precursor to Independency. On mother tongue education, Diedrich Westermann and Edwin Smith promoted Bible translation to foster educational innovation and local initiative. Abubakar Tafawa-Balewa, who would become the first Prime Minister of an independent Nigeria, introduced, as a teacher, vernacular materials into the primary school curriculum. Walter Miller, a medical missionary in north Nigeria, was similarly active in promoting African rights. The most prominent African leader of his era, Bishop Crowther organized efforts to establish schools in Nigeria in order to improve social conditions. John Philip, the Scottish missionary, worked in South Africa where he promoted African interests against white domination.

Questions for Discussion

1) Who were the Pietists and what was their attitude to government?
2) Describe Mojola Agbebi’s ideas on translation and African empowerment.
3) What were some of the reasons behind the growth of African Independent Churches?
4) What impact did Bible translation have on African relations with mission and colonial rule?
5) What impact did the East African Revival have on the growth and course of nationalism?
6) What connections do you see between Nova Scotian revival religion and African charismatic movements?
7) Discuss the role of Martin Delany in the movement for independence from mission.
8) What were the views of Diedrich Westermann and Edwin Smith on the use of the mother tongue in religion and education?
9) John Philip and Walter Miller both stressed African rights in relations with Europeans. Can you give examples of their ideas?
10) Give a brief summary of the role of Bishop Ajayi Crowther in mission to Nigeria.
Chapter 6: Resurgence and the New Order in West Africa

Pages 185-216

The end of slavery and the coming new society in Africa disrupted the old ways of doing things. In response, Garrick Braide led a charismatic movement in the Niger Delta to create hope and stability for dislocated communities. He founded Christ Army Church that sought partnership with the World Evangelical Alliance. The charismatic Babalola led the Ilesha revival among the Yoruba. Fr. Francis McNutt carried the revival torch into the Catholic Church. In the Ivory Coast William Wade Harris led a social revolution to usher in the new religious dispensation. Catholic and Protestant missions responded to the Harrist movement by undertaking new initiatives. In line with other charismatic developments, the Harrist revolution drew on old ideas of religion and healing to recruit and organize new converts. It challenged missions to rethink their policies on Africanization.

Questions for Discussion

1) What role did mission play, if any, in the end of slavery and the slave trade in Africa?

2) How did the new Christian Africans respond to the challenges of a slave-free social order?

3) What were some of the effects of the religious career of Garrick Braide in the Niger Delta?

4) How did Babalola and the Ilesha revival affect the appeal of Christianity for Africans?

5) Describe the Catholic response with respect to Fr. McNutt’s ideas of charismatic gifts and African views of religious power.

6) Give reasons for the impact of William Wade Harris on the spread of Christianity in the Ivory Coast.

7) What role did healing play in conversion to Christianity?

8) Was Harris effective or not in showing Africans to be better at evangelizing their own people than Western missions?
Chapter 7: Civilization and the Limits of Mission

Pages 217-242

The place of Christianity in the ascendancy of the West is examined in this chapter. Roland Allen offers a critical perspective on Protestant mission before and beyond the West, drawing particular attention to Paul and New Testament paradigms of church and society. Allen is critical of the mission station idea as foreign enclave, saying it is a barrier to communication. He argues that converts are not mission clients, warning against missionary paternalism in China. He contrasts European cultural captivity of the Gospel against freedom in the spirit, and how missionary preoccupation with organization and earthly dominion conflicts with the spirit of the Gospel. Christian civilization as European hegemony, he says, is a hindrance to mission and to the indigenous discovery of the Gospel. He supported the idea of the “Three-Self” movement of national empowerment as the goal and purpose of mission in China.

Vincent Donovan offers a Catholic perspective on mission and civilization. Donovan criticized investment in roads, transport, schools, and clinics because they showed no tangible results in conversion and evaded the necessity of local cultural engagement. He says it is necessary to restate the missionary mandate in response to the realities on the ground and reject ideas of Western superiority. He says adopting Maasai paradigms would bring about Christianity rediscovered. African Creed of the Maasai shows the advantages to be gained by this approach.

Questions for Discussion

1) How valid is the criticism that mission and colonialism shared in the subjugation of local populations?

2) How persuasive were the arguments of Roland Allen for separating mission from colonial conquest?

3) How did Allen defend his views from the New Testament?

4) Why was Paul important to Allen in his revisionist understanding of mission?

5) Allen maintained that converts were not clients of the West. How did he support this view with Biblical and historical examples of indigenous leaders assuming responsibility for the church?

6) Describe how the “Three-Self” plan would advance the new goal of indigenous leadership.

7) Vincent Donovan makes similar arguments for Catholic mission among the Maasai of East Africa. What remedies did he propose for the people’s resistance to conversion?

8) What value did Donovan give to the culture of the people and its role in the Church?

9) Donovan was critical of mission as Western imposition. He felt the wisdom and values of the people should be adopted as valid in their own right. Can you give specific examples of these values from the Maasai?

10) Donovan concluded his inquiry by saying he came away with the sense of “Christianity rediscovered.” Examine this claim in light of the African Creed that Donovan wrote about.
Chapter 8: Christian Awakening and the New China

Pages 243-270

This chapter considers the ways in which the Marxist revolution and Christianity have affected developments in the New China, showing the contrast between Marxist-inspired revolutionary innovation and Christian retrieval of China’s heritage. Nationalist agitation was a response to Western intrusion into China, and the Opium Wars that led to China’s subjugation. Mao attacked what he considered Western betrayal, with missions as tools of the West. In time the Cultural Revolution erupted and called for the suppression of religion. In the cycles of openness and repression, of cooption and banning, of religion as patriotic duty and as foreign betrayal, local Christians tried to balance their religious profession with their national obligations. Churches and Christians adopted by turns strategies of religious defiance, acquiescence, and appeasement. Progressive Western support for the New China placed Chinese dissidents and the cause of religious freedom on the defensive. China’s recovery from the Cultural Revolution led to the relaxation of restrictions on churches from 1978. The Catholic Church continued to resist government demands for national jurisdiction over religious life. In the Anglican Church the ordination of Florence Lei in 1948, followed by the “Memorandum” to the Lambeth Conference, caused considerable controversy in England, forcing a climb down in China. A brief relief for the churches in 1992 was followed by new restrictions in 2004 in the wake of the Falun Gong outbreak in 1999. Despite official repression and sanctions, Christian growth and expansion continued.

Questions for Discussion

1) How would you characterize the roles the leaders of New China saw for Christianity and Marxism in the country’s Communist revolution?

2) Discuss what effects the Opium Wars that opened China to occupation by the Western powers had on revolution in the New China.

3) Mao Tse Tung combined Chinese nationalism and Marxism to carry out his revolution. What was the attitude of the revolution to China’s traditions and cultural heritage?

4) What was the Cultural Revolution?

5) What was the situation regarding human rights under the revolution?

6) Give examples of Western progressive support for Mao’s rule.

7) The churches were often placed under government restrictions to control their activities. Describe the position of registered and unregistered churches in China.

8) The Chinese Anglican Church ordained its first female priest in 1948. Describe the events surrounding the ordination.

9) How would you describe the prospects of Christianity in contemporary China?
Chapter 9: Conclusion: Third Wave Awakening and Concurrent Cultural Shifts

Pages 271-288

Following the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910, Protestant mission leaders felt a need to reset the missionary agenda, taking into account issues of religious pluralism and the question of relative truth in Protestant theology. V.S. Azariah of India stressed the importance of Third World Christian leaders. At the subsequent Jerusalem Missionary Conference programs based on the social gospel were announced. Few observers predicted the coming religious resurgence that began from the mid-twentieth century, accompanied by new demographic alignments. As the new center of gravity, Christian centers began to emerge in the southern hemisphere at a time of significant decline in the North Atlantic region. The Pentecostal/Charismatic momentum carried much of the growth and expansion in the southern hemisphere, with a rapid increase in the number of new ecclesiastical blocs. In Africa and elsewhere the churches struggled with the AIDS epidemic and with political instability. In Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Angola Marxist revolutions strained Church-state relations in the midst of extensive human rights abuses. Despite the setbacks, new social programs were created with “ujamaa” socialist experiments by the government and collaborative ecumenical partnerships between Catholics and Lutherans.

Questions for Discussion

1) How would you assess the World Missionary Conference of Edinburgh 1910 and its understanding of the significance of Third World Christian leadership for the future course of mission?

2) What was Roland Allen’s view of the challenge of indigenous leadership and religious pluralism for Christian mission?

3) How important is the Pentecostal/charismatic revival for mainline Christianity?

4) How would you characterize the charismatic movement in the U.S.?

5) Can you give examples of how the Catholic Church has responded to the charismatic manifestation?

6) What is the African Synod?

7) List some of the ways in which Church-state partnership has promoted peace and reconciliation.

8) Can you describe examples of Church-state conflict in Africa?

9) In what fields do you see benefits for ecumenical cooperation?
Supplemental Assignments

1. Religion has been both a driver and a consequence of population flows across national borders, with immigrants and asylum seekers acting as carriers as well as subjects of religious movements. What evidence for this can you find in the communities around you?

2. American Churches and congregations have changed as a result of recent immigration into the United States. How has this change manifested itself in terms of membership of these churches? Has it changed the leadership of the churches?

3. In the process of assimilating into American society immigrant churches have adopted various strategies. One strategy has been to establish separate churches and congregations providing space and assurance for new immigrants to practice religion the way they did back home while acclimatizing themselves in their adopted country. Another strategy is to enroll in existing churches as active members. Yet a third strategy is to join charismatic nondenominational churches or, as an alternative, found their own charismatic/Pentecostal congregation. Can you find out which of these strategies have been adopted in a town or city near you? What reasons do people give for their choice?

4. Press and media reports carry stories of religious activities of immigrant groups in the United States. Can you find out where these reports are occurring and what activities are involved? What statistical and other numerical evidence can you find to give a picture of the size and spread of these new religious groups? List their names, addresses, and the programs and activities they undertake.

5. What role do women play in these groups? What kind of musical tradition do they follow? What particular cultural practices, if any, do they maintain? What language/s do they use in their worship?

6. Are the immigrant churches and congregations you know growing or decreasing in size and number? Is there any evidence of splits and divisions among them?

7. What classes of people constitute the primary membership of these churches? What proportion is under 35 years of age? What proportion is married with young children?