Volume 2, Issue 1 (May 2025)
ISSN 3049-9704

Journal of Religion and Public Life

OCRPL
Oxford Centre for Religion and Public Life

Journal of Religion and Public Life
Volume 2, Issue 1 (May 2025)

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Colonialism, Christian Realism and Mission as Translation

Rev. Dr. Matthew Prior [1]

Abstract: Nigel Biggar's controversial 2023 book Colonialism: A Moral Reckoning is explicitly founded on his concept of 'Christian realism' in assessing the legacies of European colonialism and, by implication, European-led Christian mission. This paper explores what this realism means, contrasting it with Jacques Ellul's stricter realism in his stronger criticisms of colonial violence. However, I contend that the missing piece in both these assessments of Christian history is the need for a realistic analysis of the post-colonial growth of the church in the Global South (Africa in particular). Lamin Sanneh's emphases on mission as translation and on indigenous agency provide a welcome counterpoint to Biggar and Ellul's focus on what the West may or may not have done.

Keywords: Colonialism, Christian Realism, Mission, Translation, Ellul

We had been in the taxi for about two minutes on a journey between Bethlehem and Nablus in the West Bank, when the driver realized that we were English. At that point he kept repeating a single word, with no apparent rancour but as a kind of reflex: "Balfour... Balfour". He waited for our understanding, and after a few seconds we duly got what he was saying, although the language barrier prevented the conversation from going any further. He was referring to the British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour, who at the end of the First World War had advocated a policy of creating a Jewish home in Palestine.

It is not my intention here to venture into the complex history of Israel and Palestine, nor to touch on the shocking and desperately tragic events which unfolded in southern

[1] Rev. Dr. Matthew Prior is Tutor and Lecturer in Ethics at St Mellitus College, London.

Israel and Gaza from October 2023 until the recent and fragile ceasefire agreement. That would be far beyond my scope and expertise.[2]

I begin with this story, drawn from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 2016,[3] because it has become for me almost a microcosm of the complex legacy of European colonialism, in this case British colonialism. How can we make a morally responsible assessment of the past, when we are still living in the shadow of these events today and when attribution of culpability is hotly contested, and rival accounts abound? The Middle East is not a context I know well beyond two Holy Land pilgrimages, but I venture into this complex territory for two reasons, one personal, one professional.

First, the personal: I am married to a southern African and have therefore found myself reading about and reflecting often upon the colonial past in that setting, making my fair share of wrong assumptions as I desperately tried to move beyond popular misconceptions and immerse myself in the history of Zimbabwe especially. In other words, even though I now feel I have less to say on the topic than I used to, I have more than a single word or thought to go on when it comes to this topic.

Secondly, the professional. I work as a tutor in a Church of England Theological Education Institution (St Mellitus College). In the wake of pandemic and the bright light it shed on the extent of racial injustice in the British context, the Church of England has been catching up with the intellectual movement sometimes referred to as "decolonisation" and asking deep questions about racial justice, in the light of contemporary realities in the UK as well as in the light of Anglican missionary history. As a tutor in Christian Ethics, I have rightly been asked to consider ways of diversifying, even 'decolonising' our curriculum and resources. The latter term is undoubtedly more freighted than the former, but at the very least engaging with the academic field of decolonisation has alerted me to the pitfalls of superficial and tokenistic efforts to add touches of diversity.[4]

I would like to begin by outlining two alternative theological responses to these complex colonial legacies before broaching a third.

Colonialism: A Moral Reckoning

The first response is a book published in 2023 by the renowned British Anglican ethicist Nigel Biggar, entitled *Colonialism: A Moral Reckoning* (hereafter *Colonialism*). After retiring as Regius Professor of Moral Pastoral Theology at Oxford University in 2022, Biggar entered into controversial territory in his direct challenge to what he saw

[2] For a scholarly but accessible account of the so-called Balfour Declaration, see Sebag-Montefiore, S. *Jerusalem: The Biography*. London: Phoenix, 2011, 402-15. The declaration itself stated that 'nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities'.
[3] This was undertaken with Walk Palestine, https://www.walkpalestine.com/en.
[4] E.g., Stone, S. (2024). 'Can Christian Ethics be Saved? Colonialism, Racial Justice and the Task of Decolonising Christian Theology'. *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 37(1), 3-18, available at https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/09539468231213557#body-ref-fn8-09539468231213557

as wrongheaded contemporary decolonialising movements.[5] Drawing on his first training as a historian he took firm issue with assertions made about the colonial past which, in his view, were false, exaggerated or ethically naive, proposing a reassessment of the (British) colonial enterprise from the point of view of what he calls 'Christian realism'. In *Colonialism*, without doubt he deplores the many harms caused by the British Empire, yet overall the book seeks to defend Britain against the charge of systematic racism. His conclusion is especially direct and overtly political, as he denounces the "paternalism of the guilty conscience" (quoting Pascal Bruckner), and the "joy" felt by certain Western academics in playing the "champion of the oppressed" while dangerously undermining the "liberal international order" that the West has helped to build, in his assessment.[6]

I am not a historian and leave it to other historians to either challenge or nuance Biggar's carefully researched construal of the past. However, as someone charged with teaching Christian ethics to Anglican ordinands, I am interested in the brand of "Christian realism" around which much seems to revolve in his argument.[7]

The Betrayal of the West

This brings me to a second kind of response, this time from a rather different source and 'stable'. From 2011-2018, I undertook my doctoral research on the work of the French historian and theologian Jacques Ellul, particularly in relation to technology. However, Ellul's output was vast, and two threads come together in his work that make it relevant to these questions. Firstly, Christian realism is an essential tenet for Ellul, as witnessed across his corpus. Secondly, Ellul wrote more than is often realised about colonial history, often scattered across disparate works but focussed (especially for my purposes here) in one particular book, the 1978 text *The Betrayal of the West* (hereafter *Betrayal*, first published in French in 1974 as *La Trahison de l'Occident)*.[8]

Today's controversies could give the somewhat misleading impression that decolonisation is a radically new field of research, when in fact its roots go back to the beginnings of the decolonial period, on either side of the Second World War. This was the context that Ellul was addressing in *Betrayal*, and indeed the book has a strangely contemporary ring even 50 years on, although it must be said that it contains some of Ellul's strengths and (in my estimate) weaknesses as a scholar.

[5] Biggar has been recently ennobled as Lord Biggar of Castle Douglas, his name put forward by the leader of the UK Conservative party, Kemi Badenoch; see https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/12/20/making-biggar-a-lord-is-badenochs-best-decision-yet/?msockid=2bb3813fab45668d0bca9264aa3f6789.
[6] Biggar, N. *Colonialism: A Moral Reckoning.* London: William Collins, 2023, 6-8. Biggar, no stranger to controversy, published this book to mark the end of the 'Ethics and Empire' project which he had directed over several years at Oxford University.
[7] Ibid., 10-12.
[8] Ellul, J. *The Betrayal of the West*. New York: Seabury, 1978. Available here: https://dn720002.ca.archive.org/0/items/jacques-ellul-texts/Jacques%20Ellul%20-%20The%20Betrayal%20of%20the%20West%20%281978%29.pdf

Ellul's Christian realism about the colonial past leads to far more critical conclusions than Biggar's about the failures of European Christian history, while at the same time Ellul's provocative tone makes it hard to endorse it fully as a text. In short, what the book offers is a powerful critique of a simple 'West to the Rest' account of Christian history, while at the same time seeking to undercut what Ellul saw as the simplistic betrayal of the West's Christian heritage that he saw as characteristic of the French left-wing political scene in his day. In short, he proposes a balanced assessment, which proceeds ultimately from judgments about the degree to which the churches of the West betrayed the Gospel of Jesus Christ at key moments in their political history.

Biggar and Ellul share then an allegiance to 'Christian realism' as an idea. However, whilst not endorsing Ellul's realism *in toto*, I would argue that in coming to terms with the violence of colonialism, it is more precise and 'realistic' than Biggar's. With this in mind, I will briefly compare these two types of realism. And yet as promised, having done this I suggest what both approaches are lacking by attending to a third kind of theological response, a response rooted in African post-colonial realities, reflecting on the work of the Gambian missiologist Lamin Sanneh and his account of the Church's expansion in Africa from the 1970s onwards, a period of increasing independence from Western churches.

What is 'Christian realism'?

Let me begin by summarizing in simplified form the two core tenets of Biggar's Christian realism, especially as they are deployed in his argument to defend British colonial history.

1. For Biggar, realism implies there is an objective moral reality that precedes human choices - hence the existence of universal principles that underlie our moral judgments. However, it is because God views our burdens and limitations with compassion that we must look history in the face, while compassionately considering the human limitations of our ancestors and taking into account the profound differences in context and circumstance. Where they made a simple mistake or tragic error, we prefer to see deliberate malice or acts of disproportionate violence.

2. We are all ultimately equal before God. Despite the sheer extent of the differences between human beings, for example in beauty, intelligence, character, strength, wealth or power, all human beings are equal. [9]

The two tenets are connected, for both an objective moral order and a fundamental human equality flow from our responsibility before God. However, holding to equality does not mean that all cultures are equal or that all social hierarchy must therefore be immoral. Some functional hierarchy is inevitable and right for human society, provided it is never an essential hierarchy. Social organization, with its division of roles, would

[9] These two points are drawn from Biggar, N. *Colonialism*, 10-12.

be necessary even in a society populated by saints, Biggar notes.[10] It is all the more necessary and good in a society composed of sinners, and every human society has recognised this in some form. Indeed, Biggar argues that hierarchical social organisation should be predicated not on the abuse of power but on the restraint of abusive power. In other words, legitimate government exists to restrain human vice, enforce the law and maintain order, on which the flourishing of society depends. This sometimes requires the use of force, and sometimes even the right to kill, in accordance with the principles of just war.[11] National interests are not necessarily immoral, because governments have a moral responsibility to look after their citizens, all the while avoiding systematic injustice to other peoples.[12] He also argues that individuals and governments can seek to do good without, ultimately, having either the means or the power to accomplish it. Failures of this kind are not morally reprehensible, or at least should be considered with a degree of compassion.

As an aside, on the question of reparations for past injustices, in *Colonialism* Biggar cites Onora O'Neill in full, casting doubt on the moral validity of righting whatever wrongs there were in Britain's colonial past: 'claims for compensation have to show that continuing loss or harm resulted from past injury. This is all too often impossible where harms have been caused by ancient or distant wrongs... Is everyone who descends in part from those who were once enslaved or colonised still being harmed by those now ancient and distant misdeeds? Can we offer clear enough account of the causation of current harms to tell where compensation is owed? Can we show who ought to do the compensating?'.[13]

Ellul's 'Christian Realism' (in the Face of Violence)

How does this compare with Ellul? *Betrayal* does not expound Ellul's Christian realism, but it's a fair reflection of that realism in the judgments it offers. Ellul's Christian realism concerning the state and empire is outlined in, among other places, his more celebrated book, *Violence: Reflections from a Christian Perspective*, published in English three years earlier in 1970. This more modest and stringent realism than Biggar's can be summarised in two simple tenets, as detailed below.

1. 'Seeing the facts as they are and grasping them thoroughly, without evasion or illusion, without recoiling in fear or horror as it becomes evident what the result of

[10] Ibid., 11.
[11] Biggar, N. *Colonialism*, 11. For the full-length argument, see Biggar, N. *In Defence of War.* Oxford, OUP, 2013.
[12] Biggar, N. *Colonialism*, 12. Again for the full-length argument, see Biggar, N. *Between Kin and Cosmopolis: an ethic of the nation*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2014. A more recent book arguing in favour of reparations is *Reparations Now!* by Anglican priest and ethicist Michael Banner but it is outside my scope here to assess the case for government-led reparations. For its part in March 2023 the Church of England agreed £100M of its historic assets from 'Queen Anne's Bounty' for this healing, repair and justice (https://www.churchofengland.org/media/press-releases/church-commissioners-england-warmly-welcomes-oversight-groups-report). [For a critique see Dr Ian Paul "Should the Church Commissioners pay slavery reparations? Further questions https://www.psephizo.com/life-ministry/should-the-church-commissioners-pay-slavery-reparations-further-questions/ Ed.]
[13] Biggar, N. *Colonialism*, 277.

> some trend is likely to be'.[14] In other words, Christian realism when it comes to colonial rule consists in having as clear and exact an understanding as possible of the facts about the past as we can, neither wilfully exaggerating nor minimising.

A key Ellulian move is to refuse to accept what he sees as the evasive distinction between 'force' as exercised by legitimate state authorities and 'violence' as perpetrated by individuals and groups without such a mandate. Whereas Biggar operates with a minimal definition of violence as potentially lethal force, which may or may not be justified depending upon a rigorous application of just war criteria,[15] Ellul operates with a maximal, not to say, all-encompassing definition of violence as 'coercing someone in a way that violates their personhood'.[16]

Biggar calls for compassion in the face of our ancestors' failures and attention to their better intentions. Ellul too refuses to ease our conscience while judging our ancestors harshly but draws attention to our unwitting complicity in their sins. 'I refuse to take the easy way out and point the finger at those shocking ancestors of the fifteenth or the eighteenth century who slaughtered the Aztecs and invented slavery... They were *our* ancestors! Their sins yesterday are ours today, because we live today by the profits they gathered yesterday. Our scientific and technological progress is inseparably connected with their conquest of the world'.[17]

Biggar and Ellul also differ sharply also when it comes to the very idea of arriving at a just judgment about the past. Both writers agree that all just judgment consists in being in accord with God's just judgment. Yet, unlike Biggar, Ellul does not claim that God's judgment can be expressed in universal principles by which we can judge historical actions, such as 'Was an action in accord with the rule of law?'. Instead, Ellul takes a more genealogical approach to the key moral convictions that he sees as shaping European Christian history at its best. These convictions are, in his brief sketch: a commitment to reason and realism, to the freedom of the individual within the mass, and, at the same time, to the importance of the poor and 'the least of these'.[18]

---

[14] Ellul, J. *Violence: Reflections from a Christian Perspective.* Eugene, Wipf and Stock, 2012. The entire text can now found here https://www.religion-online.org/book-chapter/chapter-3-christian-realism-in-the-face-of-violence/ .

[15] Biggar, N. *Colonialism*, 216-217.

[16] Whether Ellul in internally consistent in his arguments about violence, coercion and force is an important question but not one that I will seek to address at length here. It has already been addressed with characteristic clarity and vigour by Andrew Goddard in his chapter on Ellul's non-violence in *Jacques Ellul on Violence, Resistance, and War*, ed. J. Shaw, T. Demy. Eugene: Pickwick, 2017, 29).

[17] Ellul, J. *Betrayal*, 8.

[18] Drawing on Jesus' parable in Matt. 25: 31 – 46, Ellul says that the poor individual is no longer insignificant, they are *in imago Christi*. At the same time, it is important to note that Ellul severely criticizes some kinds of liberation theology and ideas of "the identification of the Poor with God" or "bringing the poor to power". He emphasizes what he sees as the hypocrisy of the Left, which tends to use the poor to justify its own political aims (*Betrayal*, 79-113). He also poses a crucial question for our times: who are the truly poor? And he gives this answer: 'The truly poor are the minorities we forget about. That is the proper definition of "the truly poor."' (Ibid., 124). Overall, Ellul's arguments on the power of public opinion and propaganda are convincing, and his arguments concerning the peoples forgotten in his day (such as the Kurds) are relevant today, even if his polemical assessment of the Palestinian cause seems very dated. We might think today of Christians and

He suggests that for the Western intellectual to reject the entire West for its failure to adhere to these principles at any point is like sawing off the branch they are sitting on. What has been of most value about Western civilisation, according to Ellul, emerged from its constant encounter with Judeo-Christian revelation. Yet this somewhat elevated view of the West's engagement with the Bible does not equate to a sense of an enduring moral superiority. As he puts it: 'I do not claim at all that the West is superior. In fact, I think it absurd to lay claim to superiority of any kind in these matters. What criterion would you apply? What scale of values would you use? I would add that the greatest fault of the West since the seventeenth century has been precisely its belief in its own unqualified superiority in all areas. The thing, then, that I am protesting against is the silly attitude of western Intellectuals in hating their own world and then illogically exalting all other civilizations!'[19]

The West was not natural soil for the Gospel, he claims. He writes not of the natural confluence but of the conflictual interaction between classical Greek thought and Judeo-Christian revelation. Ellul states that Paul's dream of a Macedonian man calling him to Europe marked a pivotal moment in world history.

> The mystery of history since Jesus Christ (and we may say, of all human history, if we really take Jesus Christ seriously) is that it was in the West that Christianity developed and revelation was broadcast. For, the West is, in itself, the opposite of what God teaches us and bids us live in Christ. The mystery of the West is that, for twenty centuries now, it has felt the pull of two strictly contradictory factors which, for all its efforts and betrayals and compromises, it has never been able to bring into unity, balance, and order.[20]

This is to our ears today a vastly overstated and sweeping statement, a theme I shall return to in concluding! Ellul is aware that Christian faith came from the East but he tends to emphasise the fact that missionary movements made significant inroads to the West.[21] What has betrayed the West, according to Ellul, is betraying the way of Jesus, which resulted from the West's constant temptation to return to its Greco-Roman roots, as it struggles with the inherently destabilising and demanding reality of the revolution begun by Christian revelation. 'The unforgivable thing is that the West was warned about this from the very beginning when Jesus Christ chose the path of non-power, of non-domination (rejecting even political domination)'.[22]

---

other religious minorities in the state of Manipur in India (and surrounding areas) suffering under a reassertion of Hindu nationalism, or the situation of Pakistani Christians, raised by Chris Sugden in the previous issue of this journal.

[19] Ibid., 16. Both here and elsewhere Ellul critiques superficial cultural appropriation.

[20] Ellul, J. *Betrayal*, 68-69. Here as elsewhere, Ellul credits Eric Auerbach's book *Mimesis* with showing how the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ radically transformed the ancient world. At a popular academic level, Tom Holland's book *Dominion*: *the Making of the Western World* has picked up many similar themes.

[21] See e.g. Ellul, J. *Betrayal*, preface viii and 74-75. Writing around the same time a classic Western text on global mission is far humbler in its claims! (Neill, S., and Chadwick, O. *A History of Christian Missions*. 2. ed., Reprinted. London: Penguin, 1990).

[22] Ellul, J. *Betrayal*, 131.

In practice, it seems that for Ellul, the paradigmatic betrayal of Jesus was the Constantinian compromise whereby the church accepted the patronage of political power or arrogated that power to itself.[23] *Betrayal* alludes only once to Ellul's avowed anarchism in a discussion exploring social control as a consequence of the failure to regulate freedom with the necessary exercise of reason and self-mastery. For Ellul's realism, external coercion is clearly necessary even in societies where the Christian faith has been or is widely regarded as true. Yet from the perspective of the Gospel, we must recognize that this necessity represents the failure of individuals to live the ideal of freedom and moral discernment that Christ makes possible (Romans 12:1-2). Contrary to the perception of freedom as spontaneously arising from our being born free as in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's famous account of the social contract, Ellul's Christian anarchism requires the exercise of redeemed reason and self-control, as modelled in the life of the countercultural Christian community.

This now leads us to the second tenet of Ellulian Christian realism, 'knowing clearly what one is doing', especially in this context when coercion tips into violence.[24] By this Ellul means to address Christians who believe that violent actions are not only necessary but can be considered as just and right in God's eyes because there is no better alternative. In other words, he addresses what another writer on this theme has called 'the myth of redemptive violence'.[25]

> Realistic appraisal shows that violence is inevitable in all societies, whatever their form. This established, however, we must be equally realistic in examining the consequences. We grant that there is an inescapable law of violence, but we must be equally clear-sighted as to the results. It is disingenuous to say, "Violence is the only way open to us; but you'll see, the results will be excellent." Here the second aspect of Christian realism enters in: you must know what you are doing.[26]

Here, Ellul develops his well-known argument about the difference between freedom and necessity for the Christian. Seeing things as they are is not the same as justifying them so as to sit comfortably with them. Christian realism sees the need for coercion but laments doctrinaire and strategic use of 'just war' theory that makes violence seemingly the only and best course available. And yet, realism does conversely lead us to humility when judging the actions of others. For example, Christian realism means not expecting Christian actions from those who do not profess the Christian faith. Ellul argues that it is unrealistic to expect Christian actions from the state, when

[23] See my own account of Anglican and Lutheran critics of Ellul's anti-Constantinian stance in Prior, M. (2020). *Confronting Technology: the Theology of Jacques Ellul*. Wipf and Stock (Pickwick), 137-38. This follows closely the argument of Anglican theologian Oliver O'Donovan (1998). *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology.* CUP.

[24] Available at https://www.religion-online.org/book-chapter/chapter-3-christian-realism-in-the-face-of-violence/ .

[25] Wink, W. *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium*. New York: Doubleday, 1998.

[26] Available at https://www.religion-online.org/book-chapter/chapter-3-christian-realism-in-the-face-of-violence/ at the start of the section headed, 'The Law of Violence'.

coercion and violence are what it must resort to in order to exist.[27] But this realisation is far from defending state violence in the name of Christian faith or ethics. For Ellul, any attempt to justify closeness to political power will always end up justifying violence rather than modelling an alternative.[28]

I have given a rapid overview of the differences between these two types of Christian realism by demonstrating that Ellul challenges Biggar's defence of empire, above all because it attempts to justify state violence from a Christian perspective, rather than offering any possible Christian alternative to it. Clearly, there are significant differences in approach and conclusions between Ellul and Biggar. And yet they share a common assumption that I wish now to question: the assumption that European colonialism, whether viewed as an evil or a sometimes-misguided force for good, is the most appropriate starting point in explaining the state of the world today. Let me explain.

Retrieving the past: Christian mission (at its best) as translation?

A selective and self-serving reading of Ellul's work could fund attempts to re-assert the Christian history of the West. However, for Ellul, this history is over, its contribution once made is now never to be remade. Ellul did not write *Betrayal* in order to 'reinvigorate faith in the West', as can be evidenced by the beginning and ending of his concluding chapter 'No one in the West is able any longer to believe in the special vocation and special greatness of the western world'[29] and '[t]he West is at its end - but that does not necessarily mean the end of the world'.[30] In less strident, more sober, political terms, we now need to *reimagine* the role of Western countries in the contemporary world, without illusion or nostalgia.[31]

And it is here that I would like to offer a third theological response to decolonisation, already hinted at above. In the name of a Christian realism about the facts as we now know them, it is basically false to assume that world Christianity as it exists today is largely the fruit of European colonialism, whether one comes from the political right or left. Curiously, for a Christian ethicist, in his own words Biggar does indeed seem more interested in 'reinvigorating our faith in the West's future' than our faith in Jesus Christ and our attention to the global church.[32] More promisingly, Ellul's concern in *Betrayal* is the revival of our hope in Jesus Christ and his liberating, and even destabilising power. However, as noted Ellul makes exaggerated statements about the importance of the West in Christian history, almost at times hinting that there was once a single

[27] Biggar would say that it is hypocritical to deny in theory what we depend upon in practice. As he puts it, pacifist believers are 'in the intellectually incoherent position of contradicting in principle what they depend upon in practice, and in the morally inconsistent position of keeping their own hands clean only because others are required to get theirs dirty' (Biggar, N. *In Defence of War,* 43).
[28] For a perhaps mediating view, See O'Donovan, O. *The Just War Revisited*. Cambridge: CUP, 2010.
[29] Ellul, J. *Betrayal*, 193.
[30] Ellul, J. *Betrayal*, 203.
[31] The former archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, pioneered the use of this term in the Church of England. Biggar is clear too that he has no interest in nostalgia but rather 'discriminate identification with liberal, humanitarian principles and endeavours of the colonial past that deserve to be admired, owned and carried into the future' (Biggar, *Colonialism,* 297).
[32] This language comes from the abstract on the dustjacket, which presumably Biggar approved.

Christian history with the West at the centre. Perhaps in that respect he was a writer of his time, but I confess a little disappointment that he did not question the basic premise of the contemporary political and cultural movements he was addressing.

Lamin Sanneh and mission-as-translation

We need to decentre this conversation from the closed circle of European history and turn in brief to the legacy of Lamin Sanneh.[33] In his book, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West*, Sanneh famously argued that the West can neither be credited nor blamed for Christianity in Africa in light of the purported fact that the explosion of African Christian faith had largely taken place in the post-colonial era. He claimed that more Africans became believers after decolonization than during the entire period of colonial empires. In 1900, after the colonial 'Scramble for Africa' in the 19th century, there were 8.7 million Christians in Africa, representing 9% of the total population.[34] In 1970, there were an estimated 120 million Christians in Africa.[35] By 2000, Sanneh recorded that the figure had risen to 360 million.[36] At the time of writing in early 2025, this figure exceeds 650 million, but what happens in Africa (as well as in other parts of the so-called Global South) is rapidly changing the entire world.[37]

And what lies behind these realities? According to Sanneh, two main factors explain this growth. Firstly, the translation of Christian scriptures into local languages, making global Christianity a truly multilingual phenomenon. Secondly, when elements of indigenous religion, such as the name of God, were adopted in Christian mission, local cultures were both challenged and renewed. He argues that it is only where these two factors co-exist that we can observe this remarkable post-colonial growth. Sanneh adds that a third factor, a corollary of the end of formal colonial rule, was increased African agency. He critiques the suspicion that this growth had more to do with political and economic motivations, in other words a culture of dependency on foreign missionary aid in countries going through rapid institutional and structural change, and in some cases, collapse. [38]

What then of the legacy of the so-called "Christian" West? Sanneh argues that Western-led Christian mission in Africa brought a number of benefits. Beyond the

[33] Sanneh died in 2019; for a brief tribute see https://lausanne.org/content/lga/2020-05/the-legacy-of-lamin-sanneh.
[34] Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003, 14.
[35] Ibid, 41.
[36] Ibid, 41.
[37] The first book to bring my attention to the radically shifting demographics was the landmark work of Philip Jenkins. *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. Oxford: OUP, 2002. See here his more recent article from 2016, https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/trend/archive/summer-2016/how-africa-is-changing-faith-around-the-world . See also Kwame Bediako. *Christianity in Africa : the renewal of a non-Western religion.* Maryknoll, Orbis, 1995.
[38] Sanneh, *Gospel Beyond the West*, 18. These arguments about what constitutes indigenous agency and belief are of course still live, a most acute case in point being the disagreements over human sexuality within the Anglican Communion.

sometimes neglected fact of the revival of indigenous cultures and languages that Bible translation efforts at their best supported, he cites a new sense of the dignity of the individual, now seen in the light of Jesus, the true human being, what he called 'the theocentric notion of the equality of persons' and, alongside these, freedom of conscience.[39]

However, for Sanneh, living Christian faith had no particular culture; it could take on different languages, accents and cultures. He concedes that in some instances Christianity supressed native cultures, but he tackles head-on the charge that Christianity was 'one colossal act of cultural intolerance'. In fact, he argues 'more people pray and worship in more languages in Christianity than in any other religion in the world'.[40] As a result, Christianity has emerged from its Western domestication and transformed itself into a truly global faith. This is why he argues that 'The West should get over its Christendom guilt complex over Christianity as colonialism by accepting that Christianity has survived its European political habits and is thriving today in its post-Western phase among non-Western populations, sometimes because of, and often in spite of, Western missionaries'.[41]

Sanneh is of course far from beyond critique here. The church historian Renee Chow Choy has recently argued that Sanneh and others of his generation, although well intentioned, could not escape the colonial mindset haunting Christianity in his use of the metaphor describing African churches as 'tributaries' of European 'rivers'.[42] The conversation has no doubt moved on from when he first wrote, all of which makes Biggar's move look more and more like a retrograde step. The recent Fourth Lausanne Congress moved the conversation on still further and it will be interesting to see what flows from its workstreams.[43]

Conclusion

However, in concluding, Sanneh's argument that translation should be the most characteristic mark of Christian mission is an enduring legacy.[44] Although it inevitably is an exercise of skill, the posture of the translator is one of sacrificial service. Rendering a revelation that did not originate with us and which we do not control requires to some degree an attitude of humility and openness to God's power, not our

[39] Sanneh, *Gospel Beyond the West*, 80. In his view, authentic Christianity can promote a moral conditioning of society so that indigenous democratic institutions can flourish (86). Here, he proposes a distinction between 'global Christianity', in other words, top-down Christendom and bottom-up 'World Christianity'. To be fair, a similar point is made in a number of places by Nigel Biggar (e.g., *Colonialism*, 88, citing Ndabaningi Sithole).
[40] Sanneh, *Gospel Beyond the West*, 69.
[41] Sanneh, *Gospel Beyond the West*, 74-75.
[42] See Chow Choy, R. *Ancestral Feeling* : *Postcolonial Thoughts on Western Christian Heritage*, London : SCM, 2021. For more on this theme, see Dube, M. *Postcoloniality, Translation, and the Bible in Africa.* Eugene: Pickwick, 2017.
[43] See the moving address by Sarah Bruel, 'Revival and Repentance: Lessons from Global Movements', both retrieving the good from the past and looking to the future. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aRyi6RETCZE.
[44] Scholars such as Vinoth Ramachandra and Andrew Walls have elaborated this theme over many years.

own.[45] Translation also enables a common understanding to be developed, not only of the texts of scripture but of one another's histories and perspectives. Translation, as Sanneh notes, has very often been in the service of cultural revival and cultural exchange. Translation and language learning also therefore enable a dialogue between people who have different histories and cultures. If we are to come to terms with the mixed record of the colonial past and to forge truly intercultural Christian mission today, we will need to get beyond slogans or snatched one-word conversations and enter into the costly work of listening to different accounts without seeking to harmonise them too quickly into a seamless single history. Christianity is a metanarrative, it must be admitted, but one that is told by multiple storytellers in different accents.[46] If we want to hear the stories of the colonial past and make some kind of sense of them, a fearless Christian realism can be of valuable service, although as we have seen, what we mean by this term will be subject to ongoing debate.

[45] For more on Ellul's ethic of 'non-power', see Jacques Ellul, *Theology and Technique: Toward an Ethic of Non-Power* (trans. C. Roy). Eugene: Oregon, Wipf and Stock, 2024.

[46] A recent Tearfund report tries to use a famous talk by the novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie entitled 'The danger of a single story' to make this point. Appropriating her work for an explicitly Christian account of culture, a recent Tearfund report states: 'Not one of us can claim exclusive understanding or ownership of God's redemption story. As God gives pieces of the jigsaw puzzle to different people, communities and organisations, we each bring our piece and we link them together until the larger picture emerges' (Tearfund, *The Restorative Revolution*, 2023, 22, available here https://www.tearfund.org/stories/2023/11/what-is-the-restorative-revolution .

To cite (Harvard):

Prior, M. (2025). 'Colonialism, Christian realism and mission as translation', *Journal of Religion and Public Life*, 2(1), 67–79.

Disclosure Statements

The author has not reported any potential conflict of interest.

The author has not reported the use of generative AI in the research for and preparation of this paper.

This research received no specific funding.