Translatability, Hospitality, and Plasticity:

Theorizing Global Christianity

The last two decades have witnessed an explosion of interest in what is generally called “global Christianity.” Growing out of the scholarly literature that explored the success of Pentecostalism in Latin America, a region that previously seemed to be impregnably Roman Catholic, the global Christianity literature has called attention to an undeniable statistical fact: Christianity is predominantly and increasingly a Third World phenomenon.

Broadly speaking, one might say that there are two basic strata within this body of literature. On the one hand, there are ethnographic studies of Christian trends in particular countries, most often focusing on Pentecostalism. These studies form a kind of foundation for another layer of scholarly literature, one that tends to get more attention: namely, the growing number of extremely capacious studies synthesizing trends from essentially the entire world (here one thinks particularly of the work of Philip Jenkins). Corresponding to this gap between the local and the global is, perhaps paradoxically, a significant gap in theoretical ambition. That is to say, it is primarily the local studies that make the most concerted effort to answer the question of why Christianity is enjoying such remarkable success, whereas the global studies are often content simply to point out the phenomenon or, at best, to offer up vague notions of the appeal of Christianity without very much explanatory or predictive power—for instance, Harvey Cox’s idea that Pentecostalism provides a way to get in contact with “primal religion” in a secularized world.

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Two examples, from Latin America and Africa, respectively, provide evidence of that gap. In the case of Kevin Lewis O’Neill’s recent work on Guatemala, the rapid growth of Pentecostalism in that country is explained in Foucauldian terms: for O’Neill, Pentecostalism offers “Christian citizens” a means of self-formation that brings with it a sense of agency (even if an outside observer might question the efficacy of the specific forms that agency takes), allowing them to take responsibility for the problems their nation is facing even as the state has retreated from most of its duties. Paul Gifford’s recent study of Pentecostal churches in Ghana, which uses the tools of political economy, makes a similar point while explicitly rejecting the kinds of explanations that are often offered up in more “global” studies:

I argue that the appeal of these new churches is not that they constitute new communities providing support no longer provided by dissolving traditional structures; or that they perform social functions (like arranging marriages) that traditional procedures no longer accomplish; or that they give opportunity to the youth to exercise authority in a gerontocratic society; or that they redress gender imbalance, or provide material assistance, employment, identity or opportunity, or bring color (through their exuberant worship) to otherwise drab lives…. they flourish mainly because they claim to have the answers to Ghanaians’ existential problems and especially to their most pressing existential problem, economic survival.⁴

O’Neill also critiques the customary way of presenting the emergence of “global Christianity,” which takes the form of a narrative that is basically shared by both scholars and Pentecostal leaders themselves:

This enduring narrative suggests that neo-Pentecostalism is everywhere, spreading the world over, like butter on warm toast—evenly and with ease…. Of analytical interest,

⁴ Gifford, Ghana’s New Christianity, viii-ix.
however, is that for all this talk about global Christianity, both neo-Pentecostals and scholars of Christianity tend to focus their rhetorical efforts on the nation far more often than the globe. Moreover, the actual movement of Christianity in the world is remarkably uneven, which makes the religion decidedly transnational rather than global.\(^5\)

In addition, O’Neill observes that scholars and preachers alike focus only on nations where Pentecostalism is expanding, “but there is practically nothing on disaffiliation or understanding how neo-Pentecostalism fails to gain traction in some contexts as opposed to others.”\(^6\)

While some might argue that an attempt at a global survey of Christianity is simply misguided, I believe that O’Neill’s critique of the global Christianity literature points toward an important role for such surveys, that of providing a more comprehensive view of the dynamics of the spread of Christianity (or of particular forms of Christianity). This is a goal that a single-country survey simply cannot fulfill, and it is a goal that the global surveys themselves gesture toward in their frequent attempts at predicting the future course of Christian growth. Yet those very predictions tend to reinforce the sense of a lack of theoretical ambition, as they are normally grounded in extrapolations from current demographic trends, an approach whose inappropriateness to the study of new religious movements is often explicitly admitted by the authors themselves. Moreover, they tend to treat the decline of Christianity in Europe as a brute fact rather than something to be explained in any comprehensive way, even though this is the single greatest instance of “disaffiliation” available to scholars.

For the *global* side of the global Christianity literature to fulfill its promise, then, it must be able to provide an account not only of why Christianity succeeds but also why it fails and why it sometimes receives no hearing at all. To achieve this would mean to identify not only what is

\(^6\) O’Neill, *City of God*, 177.
appealing in Christianity but what is off-putting, to point out its strengths and weaknesses, the human needs it fulfills and fails to fulfill—in short, it would require the development of some distinctive account of what Christianity is, in the rich variety of its lived reality. Such an account would have to be first of all descriptive, but might also become normative in its own way, providing a tool that can assist leaders and missionaries seeking to promote Christianity at the same time as it could provide scholars with a more robust way of thinking about the probable future trajectory of global Christianity.

In this essay, I will attempt to indicate a possible path toward such a comprehensive account. I will not, however, need to start from scratch, because there is at least one work in the global Christianity literature that attempts to develop a theory of Christian expansion along the lines of what I am calling for: the Ghanaian historian of religion Lamin Sanneh’s *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*. Refusing the view that Christianity’s current expansion is a new or surprising phenomenon, Sanneh argues that Christianity’s strength lies in its translatability, that is, its ability to shape and be shaped by the cultures with which it comes in contact—of which European culture is only one among many. He emphasizes again and again the deep knowledge of local traditions that missionaries must obtain in order to translate the Bible, producing a dynamic where the missionary is dependent on the local community’s cooperation and help and most often becomes deeply sympathetic with that community. The end result of this effort of translation is not to destroy local cultures, but to revitalize and empower them.

My approach will be not so much to critique Sanneh’s theory as to attempt to expand it from within by “translating” his key concept of translatability into the terms of two concepts from a theoretical tradition that is famous for its use of linguistic notions to investigate broad

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cultural phenomena: deconstruction. First, I will bring Sanneh’s theory into contact with a body of work that sheds a slightly different light on the missionary experience than translation: Jacques Derrida’s meditations on the concept of hospitality. These writings have the added appeal of discussing the career of the French missionary Louis Massignon, whose mission field was Islam. Second, I will draw on the work of Derrida’s student Catherine Malabou, whose key concept of plasticity is remarkably similar to Sanneh’s concept of translatability, but also, it seems to me, productively different.

The connections being forged here are tentative and unavoidably somewhat arbitrary—within a body of theory that, like Sanneh’s, starts from language, I am drawing one concept (hospitality) that fits well with the missionary situation that provides the foundation of Sanneh’s account and another concept (plasticity) that is formally similar to that of translatability. Yet my goal here is not to demonstrate that deconstruction provides the best window on global Christianity, but rather to provide a test run for using critical theory as a tool for developing the kind of comprehensive account that the investigation of “global Christianity” implies. Thus this essay can only provide a first step, and my hope for now is simply that it will encourage others to follow in the path it opens up.

I. Christianity and Translatability in the Work of Lamin Sanneh

Lamin Sanneh’s *Translating the Message*, now in its second edition, is one of the most formative and ambitious works in missiology and global Christianity studies. His rejection of the notion that Christian mission is necessarily a tool of Western imperialism overturned received

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wisdom, but more important is the alternative paradigm he presented, a paradigm shift that is all
the more powerful given its point of departure: the modern missionary experience in Africa,
widely viewed as the absolute exemplar of Christian mission as a hegemonic enterprise. While
acknowledging the mixed and questionable motives of many missionaries, Sanneh shifts the
focus to the African reception of the Christian message, a reception that was fundamentally
determined by the decision on the part of virtually all Christian missionaries of this era to
undertake the massive effort of translating the Bible into as many languages as possible. These
translations made Africans active agents who reimagined Christianity in a new, distinctively
African form—which explains the rapid expansion of Christianity in the era of decolonialization,
a fact that is difficult to account for if Christianity was simply a tool of Western domination.

Even if his claims were confined to Africa, this work would represent a major advance.
However, Sanneh goes a step further and argues that translation has defined Christianity from the
very beginning, because “the Christian Scripture had always been a translated Scripture.”10
Starting from the translation of a Jewish messianic movement into a Gentile religion, Sanneh
supports his thesis with a tremendous range of historical examples, including the mission to the
Slavs, the Reformation-era vernacular translations, and the cultural impact of the King James
Bible, along various episodes from modern missions to Africa, India, Japan, and elsewhere.

The founding example of the mission of the Gentiles already indicates that much more is
at stake than the literal act of translating the Scriptures—after all, the Greek translation of the
Hebrew Bible existed long before the Christian movement. More broadly, Sanneh views
translatability as affecting entire cultures, affirming and empowering them:

Christian translation projects have helped to create an overarching series of cultural
experiences, with hitherto obscure and marginal cultural systems being drawn into the

10 Sanneh, Translating, 9.
general stream of universal history. Christian particularity has hinged on the particularity of culture and language, both essential components of translation. The resulting concrete cultural systems had their genesis in, or because of, the work of translation.\footnote{Sanneh, \textit{Translating}, 3.}

Many of Sanneh’s most compelling examples of this empowerment come from the African context, where missionary translators were often the first to introduce written forms of particular languages. Languages that previously had little purchase beyond the relatively small circle of a given tribe suddenly become a vehicle for divine revelation. In addition, the very insistence on translation into the local language renders the missionary in a dependent position due to the nature of language acquisition itself, which requires the cooperation of native speakers in order to proceed. Due to the intrinsic bond between language and culture—which Sanneh claims, somewhat puzzlingly, is uniquely strong in premodern cultures\footnote{Sanneh, \textit{Translating}, 3.}—the missionary becomes a servant of the local culture, cataloguing it in a way that often also revitalizes it.

So pervasive is this trend that Sanneh can claim that Christianity is essentially “a vernacular translation movement.”\footnote{Sanneh, \textit{Translating}, 7.} Although he recognizes that many see Christianity as primarily a system of belief, Sanneh argues that the impulse of translatability renders a static conception of Christianity impossible: “Even if in practice Christians wished to stop the translation process, claiming their form of it as final and exclusive, they have not been able to suppress it for all time and for others.”\footnote{Sanneh, \textit{Translating}, 54.} Sanneh’s concept of translatability, then, fits one of the goals of an overarching account of global Christianity: it is descriptive, based as it is in copious examples, but it is at the same time also normative, insofar as Christians seem to be unable to resist the translation impulse even if they try.
In addition, Sanneh’s theory appears to provide an explanation both for why Christianity thrives in some places and for why it fails to thrive elsewhere—to put it as simply as possible, Christianity thrives when it embraces translatability and fails when it does not. Yet here a complication arises, and it is not just the obvious objection that this scheme is too simplistic. The deeper problem is that one often gets the sense from Sanneh that when Christianity fails to embrace its translatability, it fails to be Christianity. He admits that Christians sometimes “wished to stop the translation process,” yet he seems to regard it as a more or less contingent failure of Christians to live up to their full calling rather than as something like an inherent temptation of Christianity. Similarly, he views colonialism and mission as entirely separable processes. Though missionaries have tended to accompany colonists in the modern era, there is a sense in which mission is automatically anti-imperial—no matter how chauvinistic or even racist a missionary starts out, he or she will always wind up identifying with the local culture, on the model of the Apostle Paul becoming all things for all people. Overall, the deep logic of Sanneh’s position is the familiar move of defining anything bad in Christianity as being an unfortunate accident that does not touch on the good essence of the faith.

This one-sided emphasis on the positive aspects of Christianity brings with it an unrelentingly positive view of the influence of Christian mission. If missionary translation (in the broad sense) always transforms Christianity, it also always transforms the local culture. Yet contrary to the romanticism of many Western observers who decry interference in non-Western cultures as by definition destructive, Sanneh believes this process is positive and healthy:

it may be that these new churches provide us with a unique opportunity to observe Africans, presented with a new challenge, adopting and directing it in time-tested

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16 See, for instance, Sanneh, *Translating*, 131, where he says that field experience “worked its magic” on a particularly recalcitrant missionary.
channels, a process of change and assimilation that sheds new light on the question of origins in history, society, and ideas.17

In other words, any given culture is at its best when it willingly takes on the challenge of development and change. Along these lines, Sanneh develops a biological analogy, contrasting organic and neurological images of the nature of Christianity. In the organic model, Christianity is thought of “as a closed-circuit organism” for which change is necessarily disruptive and destructive.18 Missionary translation reveals a different, more fluid model:

Translation is evidence that Christianity’s neurological center is in flux, that its vocabulary is growing and changing, that historical experience has perspective-altering power, that the allotment of “neurons” continues because “neurogenesis” is a living process rather than a relic of evolution, that foreign influence lodges in the system like oxygen in the bloodstream, and that Christianity’s “localization” in the frontal lobe of establishment Christianity has shifted to the central cortex of world Christianity where new and expanded tasks have stimulated tolerance and diversity in the religion.19

Using another biological contrast, Sanneh claims that foreign influences should be understood not on the model of infection and disease, a model that underwrites the attempt to root out syncretism and heresy, but as a kind of biodiversity that makes Christianity more robust and durable.20

Yet the cultural change described here cannot simply be a matter of pure affirmation, as missionaries, even the most respectful and sympathetic ones, have always found things to critique in foreign cultures. Sanneh acknowledges the need to leave behind certain practices in

17 Sanneh, Translating, 222.
18 Sanneh, Translating, 249.
19 Sanneh, Translating, 250.
20 Sanneh, Translating, 250.
the course of the transformation Christianity calls forth, but he puts a characteristically positive
spin on it: “Cultural features that had been weakening by the time of the Christian encounter,
either because of a lack of necessary stimulus or because of natural exhaustion, received the coup
de grace.”21 Such a claim is uncomfortably close to a more imperialist notion that the only things
worth saving in a given culture are those that are already compatible with Christianity. This
points toward another tension in Sanneh’s work. While he can say that “solidarity with the poor,
the weak, the disabled, and the stigmatized is the sine qua non of Christianity’s credibility as a
world religion,”22 Sanneh is emphatic in rejecting Gibbon’s notion that Christianity only takes
hold in weak or declining cultures. The motivation for doing so is clear enough—his attempt to
show that Christianity empowers local culture would be undercut if he embraced a theory
whereby Christianity was the only thing that saved the local culture from oblivion—but the
problem is that he does not offer any alternative for what makes certain groups more receptive to
Christianity than others. As a result, he implicitly undermines his attempt to shift the center of
agency away from the missionary to the receiver of the message, insofar as his only explanation
for the failure of a given missionary is the missionary’s failure to fully embrace translatability.

All of these tensions find expression in a striking metaphor: “When one translates, it is
like pulling the trigger of a loaded gun: the translator cannot recall the hurtling bullet.”23 In
context, it is clear that Sanneh is only interested in the element of uncontrollability in this image,
but in light of the concerns I have raised above, it seems to be saying more than Sanneh intends.
For instance, the missionary is the one with the initial agency, as I note above: the translator is
the one who pulls the trigger. Moreover, the notion of mission as a gunshot sits uncomfortably
with Sanneh’s argument that missionary translation always calls forth a creative appropriation.

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21 Sanneh, Translating, 58.
22 Sanneh, Translating, 11.
23 Sanneh, Translating, 60.
For the person at the receiving end of a gunshot, the result is obviously destructive, and the most active response a gunshot can call forth is an attempt to strike back. Leaving aside the destructiveness, it is also clear that a bullet travels only in a straight line, just as properly executed missionary translation seems, in Sanneh’s account, to result more or less automatically in creative appropriation on the part of the receivers—once again, the missionary is in the driver’s seat and needs only to follow the proper procedure in order to get the desired result. In short, the imagery of mission as a gun carries with it basically all the negative connotations normally associated with mission: the denial of local agency and the destruction of local culture.

The attempt to isolate the element of uncontrollability from the much more obvious and dominant connotations of the gunshot image is but the most extreme example of Sanneh’s attempt throughout his argument to isolate only the good elements of mission and set the rest aside. Nevertheless, it does seem clear that Sanneh has hit on something real—for all his one-sidedness, no one could come away from Sanneh’s work and maintain the simplistic common sense view that mission represents nothing but a tool of imperialism. It is not a question of rejecting Sanneh’s argument but of expanding it in such a way that it can account for the negative along with the positive. In order to indicate how such an expansion might proceed, I will spend the remainder of this essay by bringing Sanneh’s theory of Christianity’s translatability into dialogue with two bodies of work from the tradition of deconstruction that, for different reasons, seem to me to push against the boundaries of the concept of translatability in productive ways: Jacques Derrida’s discussions of hospitality and Catherine Malabou’s development of the notion of plasticity.

II. Translatability and Hospitality
Derrida is best known as the father of deconstruction, which was dismissed by many early critics as irredeemably nihilistic. Later in his career, however, Derrida’s focus shifted more and more toward an engagement with ethical, political, and religious themes, most often themes that do not fit easily into any single category, such as justice, forgiveness, or sacrifice. The topic that is most germane to my concerns here is hospitality, which is obviously an important aspect of the missionary experience as Sanneh describes it—and in fact Derrida discusses the missionary Louis Massignon at some length. What makes Derrida’s discussion of hospitality particularly fruitful for the present discussion is the way that it helps one to think through the ways that openness—for instance, to translation—might inherently call for its own limitation, and therefore how resistance to translation might be an irreducible aspect of translatability itself.

Since it is the most straightforward connection, I will begin with Derrida’s description of the missionary career of Louis Massignon, a scholar of Islam who gradually developed a call to serve Islamic peoples. This shift from expertise to sympathy fits well with Sanneh’s many accounts of missionaries who, often despite themselves, came to identify more strongly with their local hosts than with the country that sent them. Further, Massignon follows Sanneh’s pattern whereby Christian mission reinforces what is best in the local culture, though in Massignon’s case the process is perhaps more conscious than usual insofar as he sets out specifically to reclaim Islam as “a religion, an ethics, and a culture, of hospitality” and thereby present it as “the most faithful heir, the exemplary heir of the Abrahamic tradition.” Indeed, Massignon takes the missionary submission to the local culture further than Sanneh may be

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comfortable with. In a section of the manifesto for Massignon’s Islamic mission quoted by Derrida, he claims that even Christian self-identification is not strictly necessary, because the missionary can take care of that on the receiver’s behalf:

   Thus, counting on the divine grace, these Christians [i.e., members of Massignon’s missionary community] want to consecrate themselves to the salvation of their brothers, and in this hope of salvation, to give to Jesus Christ, in the name of their brothers, the faith, the Adoration and the love that, because of their imperfect knowledge of the Gospels, they are prevented from giving him themselves. Salvation does not necessarily mean external conversion. It is already a lot to obtain that a greater number belong to the soul of the Church, that they live and die in a state of grace.\(^{27}\)

From a certain perspective, the vision of this manifesto represents a kind of zero-degree of mission, insofar as it has Christians venturing outside the Christian fold to bring others in, with little else being required. Yet that minimalism is paired with a hyperbolic one-sidedness, as the missionary strives to be at once the perfect guest—to understand and appreciate the host culture to the greatest degree possible—and the perfect host—including Muslims in the Christian circle in the most intimate way (“the soul of the Church”) while not requiring them to do anything, like the over-attentive host who is continually insisting, “No, let me get that for you.”

For Derrida, this overlap between guest and host is anything but coincidental. Guided by a linguistic accident—the fact that his native French uses the same word, *hôte*, to refer to both host and guest—Derrida contends that any serious analysis of hospitality will reveal that the line between guest and host is not as clear as it may seem. First of all, there is the mutual dependency of the two: there is no guest without a host, no host without a guest. While the dependent situation of the guest is perhaps the more obvious, Derrida, in a way that is characteristic of his

\(^{27}\) Quoted in Derrida, “Hostipitality,” 379.
ethical thought, pushes the obligation of the host to its utmost limit: if the host were to be as rigorously hospitable as possible, he would give the guest *everything*, thus turning himself into the guest and his guest into his host.\(^{28}\) This overlap between guest and host is what makes Abraham a “saint of hospitality,”\(^{29}\) one who leaves his home, becomes a perpetual guest, and yet welcomes guests in turn—guests who include God himself.

Derrida does realize that absolute hospitality is impossible in practice and that any actual existing hospitality has to be governed by some kind of norm or expectation—some line that separates legitimately “helping yourself” from stealing, for example. Viewed from the perspective of this conditional brand of hospitality, absolute hospitality might even seem to undermine the idea of hospitality altogether and so fail to be hospitality at all. Coming from the other direction, which is most often Derrida’s own emphasis, conditional hospitality always falls short in the face of the demand of absolute hospitality, so that conditional hospitality also fails to be hospitality at all. Derrida sums up this paradoxical relationship thus: “Between an unconditional law or an absolute desire for hospitality on the one hand and, on the other, a law, a politics, a conditional ethics, there is a distinction, radical heterogeneity, but also indissociability. One calls forth, involves, or prescribes the other.”\(^{30}\)

Thinking through these concepts in light of Sanneh, it seems that this absolute hospitality is akin to the nightmare scenario envisioned by critics who identify mission with colonialism, where the naïve hospitality of the natives leads to a total disposssession that turns them into virtual foreigners in what was once their own country but is now owned by someone else. This comparison to colonialism, it seems to me, challenges both thinkers. On the one hand, it makes it clear how much Derrida’s rhetorical strategy is directed at the strong rather than the weak—and

\(^{29}\) Derrida, “Hostipitality,” 369.
\(^{30}\) Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 147.
how dangerous it can become if the same rhetoric is pointed in the opposite direction. On the other hand, the mutual belonging of absolute and conditional hospitality might call into question the sharp distinction that Sanneh often wants to draw between mission and colonialism—perhaps the “tension” he notes between the two is not the conflict between two parallel and yet separate processes, but rather a tension inherent in the overarching dynamic of hospitality at work in both, the tension between good and bad ways of being a guest.

A parallel suggests itself here between hospitality and translatability: a Christianity that would be absolutely translatable, without reserve, would no longer be recognizable as Christianity (or indeed as anything in specific). Resistance to the dynamic of translatability is not just a contingent failing, but a necessary aspect of translatability as translation of something rather than simple dissolution or assimilation. In this view, the failed missionaries who resisted translatability were not aberrant phenomena, but rather exist along with their successful peers on a continuum between absolute self-identity and absolute dissolution of identity—that is, in the irresolvable tension of conditional as opposed to absolute translatability.

Derrida’s reflections on hospitality also provides a way to think through the problems of agency that I discussed in terms of the metaphor of translation as a gunshot. Sanneh’s tendency is to put the missionary in the driver’s seat in the initial encounter, then shift the emphasis to the local culture’s agency. If one thinks of the missionary situation as an instance of hospitality, however, it becomes clear that no one is ever unambiguously in control, that the roles of guest and host are continually shifting, with both parties requiring each other and yet also threatening to undermine each other. Sanneh’s image of the authentic missionary as one who is necessarily self-effacing as he or she gives the local culture a much-needed shot in the arm need not be

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31 Sanneh, *Translating*, 4-5, 162.
rejected, but it would have to be situated among a range of possible outcomes in the always tense and difficult encounter of hospitality.

III. Translatability and Plasticity

Another concept that can help to complicate and enrich Sanneh’s notion of translatability can be found in the work of one of Derrida’s students, Catherine Malabou: namely, the concept of plasticity.\textsuperscript{32} Though she develops it through a complex reinterpretation of Hegel, the concept itself is remarkably simple and founded on different potential meanings of the term “plastic.” Drawing on the notion of “the plastic arts,” plasticity refers both to form and to receptivity to form—yet the term also evokes the destructive force of “plastic explosives.”

The analogy between the first two meanings of plasticity and the concept of translatability is fairly clear, as the act of translation requires something to have a determinate form to start with and yet also be capable of taking a new form. Indeed, in laying out differing approaches to maintaining Christian identity, Sanneh uses “reform” as a kind of synonym for translatability.\textsuperscript{33} What Malabou’s concept of plasticity adds is an element of negativity and trauma, a negativity that Sanneh hints at (albeit unconsciously) with his analogy, discussed above, between translation and firing a gun: “When one translates, it is like pulling the trigger of a loaded gun: the translator cannot recall the hurtling bullet.”\textsuperscript{34} In a fruitful coincidence, Malabou has also addressed brain plasticity,\textsuperscript{35} which, as we have already seen, Sanneh uses as a metaphor for translatability.\textsuperscript{36} Here again Malabou adds a negative element: the brain does change and

\textsuperscript{33} Sanneh, \textit{Translating}, 44-46.
\textsuperscript{34} Sanneh, \textit{Translating}, 60.
\textsuperscript{36} Sanneh, \textit{Translating}, 250.
adapt, as Sanneh emphasizes, but trauma from without or excessive rigidity from within (such as Alzheimer’s disease) can destroy it.

Broadly speaking, one could say that any system defined by plasticity must steer between the extremes of being so receptive to form as to dissolve entirely or of so thoroughly receiving one specific form as to become completely inflexible. This balancing act seems to resonate with Sanneh’s belief that Christianity is at its best when it most fully embraces its translatability, when it remains flexible and receptive to other cultural realities. Yet I believe that the greatest contribution of plasticity to Sanneh’s project is the fact that it provides a way of thinking about the conditions where Christianity might find a more favorable condition, insofar as one can think of a culture as a plastic reality as well. A weak or declining culture might seem to be an obvious candidate, given that it will be least able to resist outside influences, but Sanneh’s account of the empowering influence of Christianity on such cultures indicates that the goal is to push those cultures toward a more robust and healthy kind of plasticity—and indeed, cultures that are plastic in the healthier sense could easily be quite strong and also quite welcoming of outside ideas, including Christianity.

Christianity and culture alike would then be at their best when both maintain a healthy form of plasticity. Sanneh’s account provides good reasons for assuming that the missionary encounter, at least when it is based in translation, is a paradigmatic instance of mutually reinforcing plasticity, one that avoids the perpetual temptation of overly solidifying the relationship between Christianity and a particular culture. Missionaries typically come from areas where the bond between Christianity and the local culture is strong and where the local culture itself is enjoying sufficient strength to be able to provide resources to support travel, translation efforts, and so on. By submitting to the translation imperative and making themselves
servants of the receiving culture, however, the missionaries follow a strategy encapsulated in God’s message to the missionary St. Paul: “my power is made perfect in weakness” (1 Corinthians 12:9). In so doing, they return to something like St. Paul’s original model of Christian community, which is not fundamentally a translation from Judaism into Gentile culture but rather a continually negotiated encounter between the two, one in which the poles of strength and weakness are perpetually reversed and complicated so that neither group dominates (see Romans 14:1-15:13).

As in the case of hospitality, thinking through Sanneh’s project in light of plasticity indicates that mission and colonialism cannot be easily separated. One might express this fact by introducing a third moment into the concept of translatability: not only can something be translated into something else, it can be translated to somewhere else, because the word translation can also refer to simple shifts in position. When Christianity is translated to another culture, the effect is invariably explosive—depending on which side of the transaction is stronger, the explosion can virtually wipe out the receiving culture, as was periodically attempted with Native Americans in the United States, or the attempt can “blow up in the missionary’s face,” leading to total failure and even death. Sanneh does document cases of the latter, but explains them as a warning of what happens when Christianity rejects its translatability. After translating the concept of translatability in terms of plasticity, however, one can see that the destruction of local cultures is a real danger when Christianity is in a position of strength and self-confidence.

If Christianity can be conceived in terms of plasticity, therefore, that means that colonialism is not simply a betrayal of a more authentic, liberatory kernel of Christianity—after all, even in Sanneh’s original terms it seems difficult to understand what might constitute the
core unchanging identity of Christianity—but rather an inherent temptation. Christianity really does, as Sanneh thoroughly demonstrates, transform local cultures in an empowering way, and it also necessarily pushes outward. When one of those cultures re-formed by Christianity becomes sufficiently strong and self-confident, as the various Western European cultures had become by the modern era, an explosive confrontation becomes a real danger. Indeed, one might even suggest that it is precisely the strength of the bond between Western culture and Christianity that accounts for the current precipitous decline of Christian practice in Europe: when the Western “progress” with which European Christianity had so thoroughly identified itself culminated in the catastrophe of global war, Christianity was discredited just as much as the old values it promoted.

Overly rigid identification with a single culture, then, does not cause disaster only in the missionary encounter, but can also “blow up in one’s face” at home. By making themselves weak and dependent—in the modern context, by aiming Sanneh’s “gun” of translatability at their own imperial pretensions—missionaries bring out what is best and most hopeful in Christianity’s plasticity, reducing the chances of triggering its destructive potential. Perhaps if they had brought a similar lesson home with them, the situation for Christianity in Europe would be different today.

IV. Potential further steps

This attempt to translate Sanneh’s concept of translatability into the terms of two strains of the tradition of deconstruction can only be a preliminary gesture, yet I believe that it provides a test-case for the way that concepts from critical theory can be helpful in developing the kind of overarching account of the dynamics of Christian expansion, decline, and occasional failure that the enterprise of “global Christianity” seems to call for. On the one hand, the dialogue with
Derrida’s notion of hospitality gives a broader perspective on the question of agency in missionary encounter, complicating and enriching it. On the other hand, the shift from translatability to plasticity helped to clarify the relationship between the positive and negative possibilities in the relationship between Christianity and particular cultures and suggested that Christianity translatability is best conceived not as a one-time translation from a given culture into another, but rather as a model for ongoing cross-cultural encounter. Furthermore, in both cases, there was reason to believe that colonialism and mission are not as easily dissociable as Sanneh would like, while both nonetheless provided a basis for preserving Sanneh’s core insight that the two are not simply identical—if colonialism provides an image of mission gone horribly wrong, it remains the case that something else is going on when mission goes right.

While this essay cannot claim to represent a full-blown theory, then, I believe it has at least provided an initial indication that an encounter between the global Christianity literature and one particularly philosophical or theoretical tradition has the potential to move us closer to that goal. Yet just as missionary translation cannot be conceived as one-directional, so too could this encounter between philosophy and the phenomenon of global Christianity be challenging and enriching for philosophy itself. For in a strange coincidence, at the same time as the global Christianity literature has been exploring what might be called the “world historical” fate of Christianity, so too have European philosophers and their American followers been engaged in a wide-ranging debate on the future of Europe’s Christian heritage. This debate normally goes under the heading of the “religious turn,” and in fact Derrida’s later work on religion provided a significant impetus to this movement.

If these fields overlap, it is in a shared exclusion, for both concede from the outset that traditional Christianity—or indeed any serious form of Christian piety, traditional or otherwise—
has at best a marginal future in Europe. This negative point of intersection, however, belies a more fundamental contradiction: while the global Christianity literature argues that Christianity is becoming essentially a Third World phenomenon, the “religious turn” is premised on the irreducible connection between Christianity and European culture, a link so fundamental that it can supposedly persist even in the face of mass abandonment of anything recognizable as Christian practice. A broadly philosophical or theoretical approach to the phenomenon of global Christianity might have the potential to shift this debate from its uncritically Eurocentric foundations, which in turn could set off a positive dynamic whereby the philosophical traditions in question could produce work more directly useful to the study of global Christianity.

For the time being, however, these philosophical traditions offer considerable intellectual resources that theorists of global Christianity are likely to find helpful. Even if the encounter were limited to deconstruction, there is Jean-Luc Nancy’s ongoing “deconstruction of Christianity,” which links the question of Christianity’s future to the ongoing process of globalization. Derrida’s later work beyond his discussion of hospitality is also relevant, perhaps most notably his reflections on the way that distinctively Christian concepts such as forgiveness can shape non-Western cultures even when those cultures do not become “Christian” in any traditional sense. Beyond deconstruction, one thinks also of the growing body of postcolonial theory, as well as Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the “rhizome” that spreads as a kind of network without any defined center.

The particular starting point is less important, however, than a stance of openness and experimentation. Just as the explosive growth of Christianity in the Third World has taken many

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by surprise, so too might we find it surprising which intellectual traditions provide the best tools for understanding it. For the time being, though, I believe I have shown that deconstruction provides some such tools.