

**‘Towards a Theology of Mission in the United States,
with special reference to Lesslie Newbigin and Lamin Sanneh’**

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ABSTRACT

The challenging cultural context of the United States presses churches toward practical ways to make disciples and engage in mission. This study compares the writings of Lesslie Newbigin and Lamin Sanneh for their contributions to a theology of mission for this context, focusing on the practical implications of different ways of conceptualizing the Church’s engagement with culture. ‘Postmodern’ is used to characterize the American socio-cultural milieu, increasingly complex due to the widespread influence of postmodernist ideas, although modernity continues also as a cultural force. Problematics of this milieu include epistemological relativism, moral relativity, and suspicion of power interests. Postmodernism overlays a history of Christian influence in America, eroding under secularity yet residual in the American mythos. Newbigin’s discourse on modern Western culture, and Sanneh’s discourse on ‘mission as translation’ are compared by reference to gospel, church, and culture. Newbigin tends to reduce the gospel to a worldview because of his epistemological critique of culture, but his ecclesiology counters this. His cultural analysis is criticized as setting mission on a path that exacerbates postmodern problematics, especially suspicion of power interests. Sanneh sees Christianity as a vernacular translation movement in which receptors discover and assimilate the gospel through enacting moral responses to divine self-disclosure. His individualistic ecclesiology is a weakness. Approaches conducive to the postmodern milieu include interpersonal relationships, the language of personal testimony and story, and dialogue centred on the biblical narrative. Newbigin’s missiology of cultural renewal, in tandem with Sanneh’s claim that missionary activity is the primary manifestation of the missio dei, with church structures as contingent arrangements, constitutes a call for a reorientation of missiology and ecclesiology. The study affirms and proposes a theology of mission directed to cultural renewal, with Bible-based dialogue a key methodology. These findings merit further research and development in practical terms.