

# *Theology* on *the Web.org.uk*

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



*Buy me a coffee*

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



**PATREON**

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbadshaw>

---

A table of contents for the *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_ajet-02.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ajet-02.php)

# **Reflections On Contextualization: A Critical Appraisal of Daniel Von Allmen's “Birth of Theology”**

*D. A. Carson*

Some essays capture a mood or put into words what many others have been struggling to articulate. When such essays are published, they immediately gain assent and wide recognition — not necessarily because they are cogent or their arguments unassailable, but because they burst onto the theological scene just at the time when they seem to confirm the opinions of many readers.

Arguably, something like that has happened to Daniel von Allmen's important article on the birth of theology.[1] Von Allmen's argument, as we shall see, turns on his interpretation of the New Testament at several key junctures. Perhaps that is why the editors of this Journal have asked a New Testament student like myself for a preliminary evaluation of his essay.

In what follows I shall summarize von Allmen's arguments, and then proceed to a discussion of exegetical and methodological problems associated with his work. Finally, I shall try to assess von Allmen's judgment of the kind of contextualization that ought to take place, closing with some concluding reflections of my own on this crucial issue.

## **1. A Summary of Von Allmen's Article**

Von Allmen's essay was itself a response — indeed, a response to a response. The late Byang Kato had

responded to the growing dangers he perceived in the work of such African theologians as Harry Sawyerr and John Mbiti.[2] Emerging as the dominant evangelical voice in African theology before his untimely death, Kato had detected in certain strands of African theology what he variously called "Christopaganism", "syncretism" or "universalism" and in which he saw "a real threat to the future evangelical church" of Africa.[3] Against this protest, von Allmen sets out "not only to reaffirm that an African theology is necessary, but also to show how it is possible on the basis of a true fidelity to the New Testament."[4] In other words, the force of von Allmen's criticism of Kato is that he is not biblical enough, and that Scripture itself authorizes the kind of contextualization von Allmen advocates.

Von Allmen turns to the New Testament, and begins by assuming that the "Judaic, that is Semitic, character of the Christian faith at its birth is beyond question."<sup>[5]</sup> Within one generation, however, the church found its firmest footing on Hellenistic soil. Von Allmen therefore proposes to discover "what were the forces behind this Hellenization of Christianity, and what sort of people were its first exponents."<sup>[6]</sup>

### **Forces Behind Hellenization: The Missionary Movement**

Von Allmen distinguishes three movements, almost stages, based on three types of people. The first is the missionary movement. This explosion came about without initiation by the Jerusalem "pillars" (Gal. 2:9): indeed, the Aramaic-speaking apostles were caught unaware by these developments. What happened rather was that "Philip and his Hellenist brothers saw in the persecution that was scattering them a divine call to preach the gospel outside the limits of Jerusalem."<sup>[7]</sup> This was partly because they had the linguistic competence: they were at home in Greek and familiar with the LXX. Even at this stage, however, this Hellenistic "missionary" movement was not a missionary movement in

any modern sense. No one was being commissioned or sent. It was simply "a work of evangelism undertaken under the pressure of external events (of persecution) that were understood to be providential."<sup>[8]</sup> All of this suggests to von Allmen that in this "first adaptation of Christianity to a new context," although there was a "missionary thrust" it was not the thrust of people from one culture evangelizing the people of another, but the spread of Christian witness from Hellenistic Christians to Hellenists. In other words:

No true "indigenization or contextualization" can take place because foreigners, the "missionaries", suggest it; on the contrary, true indigenization takes place only because the "indigenous" church has itself become truly missionary, with or without the blessing of the "missionaries".<sup>[9]</sup>

#### Forces Behind Hellenization: Translating The Good News Into Greek

The second movement is that of "translators". In one sense, as von Allmen rightly points out, no translation was needed. The "missionaries" and those being evangelized shared Greek as a common language, and even a Greek Bible, the Septuagint. What concerns von Allmen here is something else: viz., "the manner in which the Hellenists, who had received the Gospel from the lips of Aramaic Christians, translated it into Greek for the pagans. By Gospel I mean here, therefore, the living preaching."<sup>[10]</sup> Von Allmen uses form critical theory and appeals to I Cor. 15:3-5,11 to insist that the Hellenists were not free-lancers: there were limits to how far they could digress from the tradition that had come to them. But a telling step came, he says, when the Hellenistic believers chose *kurios* to render Hebrew *rabbi* and Aramaic *mari*. The result was a title for Jesus that served simultaneously as, among Jews, a Greek transcription of the divine Name, and, among others, as the word used to pay honor to the Emperor. This is the

pre-Pauline history of the title. Von Allmen asks:

Was it a fatal slip? Criminal truckling to the Greeks and Romans? Paul does not look at it in that way, since he makes this very title of Lord the centre of his theology. In any case, there can be no talk of truckling when to confess "Jesus is Lord" exposed one to persecution for refusing Caesar the honour he claimed for himself.[11]

What all this assumes, von Allmen argues, is that "the 'native' preachers were bold enough . . . to be themselves, while remaining faithful to the foundations of the faith they had received, to sift critically the received vocabulary in order to express themselves intelligently to their linguistic brothers."[12]

#### Forces Behind Hellenization: The Rise Of Christian Worship

The third movement was the rise, not of theologians, but of poets -- i.e. those whose work assisted the church in its indigenous worship. Von Allmen approves the thesis of Schlink, that "the basic structure of God-talk is not the doctrine of God but the worship of God."<sup>[13]</sup> We may examine this movement, he says, by studying some of the hymns preserved in the Pauline epistles. Von Allmen selects as his test case Phil. 2:6-11. He prints it in poetic format, putting in parentheses the bits that many scholars hold to be Pauline redaction. Von Allmen's chief point with respect to this hymn, however, is that the parallelism between "taking the position of a slave" and "becoming like a man" (2:7) is not a Jewish or Jewish-Christian idea at all; for among them a man was not considered to be a slave. "It is for the Greeks, particularly at this late date, that man is a slave, bound hand and foot in submission to all-powerful Destiny."<sup>[14]</sup> Moreover, von Allmen argues, "it would be possible to find in the hymn a number of other expressions which find their closest

equivalent in the Gnostic myths of the Original Man: the 'divine estate', the equal of God."<sup>[15]</sup> But none of this is dangerous syncretism, von Allmen argues, for in this hymn the language used describes not "a mythical Original Man losing his divine form and assuming a human appearance"; for only the vocabulary remains, and "it is used to sing the praise of Jesus of Nazareth who entered history as a man of flesh and blood."<sup>[16]</sup> "We must see in this hymn an interesting, and indeed successful attempt to express the mystery of the condescension of Christ in the characteristically Greek vocabulary."<sup>[17]</sup>

From this, von Allmen draws a more general conclusion:

The theologian has no right to fear the spontaneous manner in which the Church sometimes expresses the faith. If the apostles had been timorous and shut the mouths of the poets through fear of heresy, the Church would never have found footing on Hellenistic soil. Thus the way things happen in the primitive church teaches us that in the Church the life and faith is [sic] the primary thing. Missionaries do not preach a theology but rather the Gospel (the good news). Nor is the response of faith yet theology, but rather worship or hymns proclaiming the mighty deeds of God in Jesus Christ.<sup>[18]</sup>

It is only following these movements, von Allmen argues, that theologians are wanted, exemplified by Paul. But even here, he points out, Paul is not a systematician in any modern sense. The two functions of theology are the critical and the systematic, and Paul in his writings devotes himself primarily to the former. By this, von Allmen means that before adapting an already coined formula, Paul examines it "critically" and his criterion is "the received faith".

He does not demand that doctrine should be in literal agreement with the primitive Christian preaching. But whatever may be its formal expression, the

doctrine must correspond to the inner thrust of the apostolic faith. New hope is part of the inner thrust of the faith, and so eschatology is an essential element of Christian theology. Provided one reintroduces this moment of expectation, this eschatological tension, then why not use Greek terminology? [19]

Along this line, von Allmen argues that the church began with the language of master/disciple, and adapted it to the Hellenistic mystery religions of the day to make Christianity over into "the definitive and absolute mystery religion." [20] The one limitation Paul imposed on this Greek influence was resurrection language. Christ may be like Osiris or Kore when Paul says "You died with Christ," but Paul is independent of Greek thought when he says "You have been raised with him" — especially so when he sets the ultimate raising as a hope for the future.

Along similar lines, Paul in Colossians (von Allmen is not sure whether the epistle was composed by Paul or someone from the Pauline school) responds to the strange amalgam of Judaizing and syncretism by setting over against the worship of angels the supreme headship of Christ. Paul begins, von Allmen argues, with the centre, viz. Jesus is Lord — i.e. as crucified and risen, Jesus is Lord. This central feature of Christianity enables Paul to rebut the Colossians. This what von Allmen means by the "ordering function of theology."

Even amidst the fiercest polemic, Paul remains firmly rooted in the basis of the Christian faith: Christ who died and was raised. It is only from this centre that one may dare to say anything at all and all theological statements, whether polemical or constructive, must be set in relation to this centre. [21]

Von Allmen then turns from the New Testament to the problem of how anyone, African or otherwise, must properly set about "doing theology" in his or her own context. Before setting forth his own proposal, he

briefly describes three impasses that must be overcome.

### Von Allmen's Impasses to African Theology: Paternalism, Heresy, and Conservative Contextualizing

The first is paternalism. Paternalism expresses itself not only in the sense of superiority manifested by Western theologians, but also in the "colonized" complex of Africans and other victims of colonization. In the first century, the power relationship between the cultures was if anything the reverse of modern problem: the Jewish-Christians must have felt threatened by the all-pervasive Hellenistic culture, not the other way round. Von Allmen's solution is that Africans become aware of the value of their own culture in its own right, so that they may "bring to birth an African theology that is more than a theology characterized by reaction."<sup>[22]</sup> Moreover, just as the Hellenistic Christian movement in the first century was the work of Hellenists themselves, in a spontaneous movement, so also must Africans do their own theology; and this means that Westerners cannot without paternalism even encourage Africans to get on with it. Rather: "Once and for all, then, there must be trust."

The second impasse is heresy. Von Allmen says that since "everyone is a heretic in somebody's eyes,"<sup>[23]</sup> we must tread very cautiously. His study of the New Testament leads him to conclude that at the first stage of indigenization, people are not too worried by dangers of heresy; and in any case, in Paul's writings,

the heretics are not to be found among the Hellenistic progressives but rather among the Judaizing reactionaries who feel themselves obliged to denounce the foolhardiness or the rank infidelity of the "translation" project upon which the Church has become engaged in Hellenistic territory. But, remarkably enough, this very conservatism goes hand in hand with a, perhaps unconscious, paternalism. The legalism of the Colossian heresy is accompanied by a disproportionate respect

towards other powers than Jesus Christ.[24]

The third impasse is an approach to contextualization that perceives it as an adaptation of an existing theology. The Hellenists, von Allmen argues, simply proceed with evangelization; and the theology eventually emerged from within this Hellenistic world — but as a later step. Von Allmen's conclusion is stunning:

It must be said with all possible firmness: there can be no question, in our days either, of an Africanization or a contextualization of an existing theology. Any authentic theology must start over anew from the focal point of faith, which is the confession of the Lord Jesus Christ who died and was raised for us; and it must be built or re-built (whether in Africa or in Europe) in a way which is both faithful to the inner thrust of the Christian revelation and also in harmony with the mentality of the person who formulates it. There is no short cut to be found by simply adapting an existing theology to contemporary or local taste.[25]

What this means is that so far as it is possible, African Christians, and indeed all Christians, must begin *tabula rasa*. Missionaries should provide working tools and building materials to believers not yet able to train their own people, and then leave them to get on with the task.

Rather than teach theology (even a theology that claims to be a "New Testament theology"), what we should try to do is point out what the forces were that governed the elaboration of a theology on the basis of the material furnished by the early church. This is the reason why, in my opinion, the study of the history of traditions in the early church is of capital importance in Africa even more than elsewhere.[26]

In short, what von Allmen proposes is that no one has the right to tell or even encourage Africans to get on with the task, as that would smack of paternalism

and meanwhile no one has the right to provide them with any theology, as this would vitiate his understanding of the principles of contextualization as he understands them. We must simply let the African church be African and an African theology will ultimately result.

## 2. Problems in von Allmen's Biblical Exegesis

There are many points of detail in von Allmen's exegesis that could be usefully raised; but I shall restrict myself to four areas. Like him, I shall largely dispense with the clutter of detailed footnote, and sketch in a response with fairly broad strokes.

### Drawing Wrong Lessons About Hellenistic Witness

Von Allmen's reconstruction of the earliest stage of witness is seriously deficient. As we have seen, he denies the influence of the Aramaic-speaking apostles, assigns all credit to the Hellenistic believers who interpreted the outbreak of persecution as a divine call to preach the gospel outside the limits of Jerusalem, and from this deduces that true contextualization takes place not because outsiders (the Aramaic-speaking apostles) suggest it, but because the indigenous church (the Hellenistic Christians) have themselves become truly missionary.

### Six Assertions About the Witness of the Early Church

Now it is true, as Boer[27] pointed out some years ago, that the church in Acts is not presented as a community of believers with an immediate and urgent sense of commitment to carry out, in an organized and methodical way, the great commission. Nevertheless, the arguments of both Boer and von Allmen could do with a little shading. First, the church began from a tiny group. It did not begin as a multinational missions agency with boards and head offices and district conferences, plotting the systematic evangelization of the

world. It began with a handful of people transformed by the Spirit of God and by the conviction that with the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah the promised eschatological age had begun. Immediately there was witness — not the strategic witness of careful planning but the spontaneous witness of irrepressible spiritual life, the most effective witness of all. In this atmosphere of early pulsating beginnings, it was inevitable that each group of early believers shared their faith primarily with those of its own language and culture. But at this very early stage, to draw lessons about the slowness of the Aramaic-speaking community to reach out to the Hellenistic world is no more realistic than to draw lessons about the slowness of the Hellenistic church to reach out to the Aramaic-speaking world. Luke's narrative simply does not address the kind of questions von Allmen seems to be posing.

Second, even at the earliest stages of Christianity, and within the Aramaic-speaking community, there was a consciousness that what was being experienced was the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant by which all peoples on earth would be blessed (Acts 3:25). And when the Aramaic-speaking church faces the first strong opposition, the believers pray for holy boldness to speak the word courageously (Acts 4:24-30). It is very difficult to distinguish this from the attitude of the Hellenistic believers when they faced persecution. There is no evidence (pace von Allmen) that the latter alone saw in persecution a special divine call to preach the gospel outside the confines of Jerusalem. Rather, the believers scattered, the Aramaic-speaking ones to places congenial to them, and the Hellenistic believers to places congenial to them — both groups still boldly witnessing. Even then, the Hellenistic believers spoke, at first, primarily if not exclusively to Greek-speaking Jews (Acts 11:19-20) — a point von Allmen finds so difficult he has to say that Luke probably shaded the account here "to prevent the stealing of Paul's thunder and keep for him the honour he thought his due." [28] But a simpler explanation lies immediately to hand,

provided we are not trying to squeeze the text into a preset mold. The Hellenistic believers were in the first instance themselves Jews; and so quite naturally they witnessed within their own Greek-speaking Jewish environment. In this sense there is still no major cross-over of racial, cultural and linguistic barriers by either Aramaic-speaking or Greek-speaking Christians at this point. And when the Hellenistic believers do begin their witness before Gentiles in Antioch (Acts 11:20-21), the account is placed after the evangelization of Samaria and of Cornelius, about which I'll say more in a moment.

Third, the reticence the Aramaic-speaking believers ultimately displayed was not over the fact of evangelism among Gentiles, but over the conditions of entrance to the messianic community.[29] Many streams of Judaism were aggressively proselytizing others in the first century so it is not surprising, even from the perspective of their background, that early Jewish Christians, both Aramaic and Greek-speaking, did the same. The debates behind Gal. 2 and Acts 15, therefore, do not stem from problems in mere indigeneity or contextualization, still less from carelessness about the great commission (or, in much modern discussion, its inauthenticity), but from a massive theological question: On what grounds may Gentiles be admitted to the messianic community? The answer had to do with the way in which the new covenant could be seen to be related to the old; and the synthesis forged by these debates in the early church was used by God to contribute to the writing of our New Testament documents.

To reduce such complex and frankly unique circumstances to the parameters of the modern debate over contextualization is to distort and trivialize (however unwittingly) the biblical evidence. It is historical nonsense to label the Hellenists "progressives" and thereby tie them to modern liberal theology, while labeling the Aramaic-speaking Christians "reactionaries" in order to tie them to modern evangelicals. Indeed, it

is worth observing that according to Luke the first opposition that resulted in a martyr sprang from a "conservative" Hellenistic synagogue (Acts 6:9). This entire point is so important that I shall return to it from another perspective in the next division of the paper.

Fourth, within the synthesis I am suggesting, the large amount of space Luke devotes to the conversion of the Samaritans (Acts 8) and of Cornelius and his household (Acts 10-11) is eminently reasonable — the latter completely unmentioned by von Allmen, the former barely so. The Cornelius episode is particularly instructive for here, before there is any record of witness to non-proselyte Gentiles by Hellenistic Jewish believers, an Aramaic-speaking apostle is sent by the Lord to a Gentile who is not, technically, a proselyte. The point of the story, carefully repeated by Peter before a suspicious Jerusalem church, is that if God by pouring out his Spirit on the Gentiles, as on the Jews, has shown that He has accepted them, can Jewish believers do any less? This point does not concern the crossing of merely cultural, racial and linguistic barriers, as significant as such barriers are. The "them/us" dichotomy stems from Israel's self-consciousness as the people of God, and therefore with the clash between God's antecedent revelation in what we today call the Old Testament, and God's revelation in Christ Jesus and all that has come from it. The Jewish believers raise their questions not at the level of contextualization, but at the level of theology — indeed, at the level of systematic theology, for their question ultimately concerns the way in which the old and new covenants are to be related to each other. But none of this does von Allmen consider.

Fifth, part of von Allmen's argument about the reticence of Aramaic-speaking apostles stems from silence. The truth of the matter is that Luke does not purport to give us a comprehensive history of the early church, but a highly selective one. After Acts 8:1, we know nothing

or next to nothing about the ministries of (say) Matthew or Thomas or Bartholomew or Andrew. Extra-canonical sources are not very reliable in this area but some of the best of them tell us that Thomas, for instance, proclaimed the gospel as far east as India, where he was reportedly martyred. Von Allmen's sweeping conclusions regarding the Aramaic-speaking apostles are therefore based not only on a rather selective and anachronistic approach to Acts, but even on the silences of Acts.

Sixth, the above arguments suggest that Luke is less interested in providing us with a merely sociological analysis of how various groups in the early church functioned, as how the resurrected Christ, by his Spirit, continued to take the initiative in building his church. There are indeed heroes and villains in Acts but above all there is on display the missionary heart to God himself. Not only does the initiative belong to God in the Cornelius episode, but even in Acts 2 the gift of tongues enables Jews from every linguistic background to hear the wonderful works of God in their own language — not only the principal reversal of Babel but the demonstration of the principal removal (and not by Hellenists or Aramaic speakers but by God himself) of the temporary barriers surrounding his old covenant people. The prophecy/fulfillment theme in Acts is designed to display the inevitability of the dawning of the gospel age — precisely because it is God who planned it and is even now bringing it to pass by his Spirit. To force this magnificent panorama into lesser molds is to fail to understand it. We may learn some useful lessons about contextualization in the pages of the New Testament but we must not force this book into our preconceived categories.

#### Conclusions Not Based on Evidence

In almost every case, von Allmen's conclusions are not entailed by or even very clearly suggested by the exegetical evidence he presents. To take but one example: After discussing the role of the "poets" in

leading the church in worship, von Allmen, as we have seen, draws "some more general conclusions. The theologian has no right to fear the spontaneous manner in which the Church sometimes expresses the faith. If the apostles had been timorous and shut the mouths of the poets through fear of heresy, the Church would never have found footing in Hellenistic soil." [30] Even if von Allmen's exegesis of Phil. 2:6-11 is basically correct, there is no way it will support so broad a conclusion. Von Allmen himself points to areas in which the earliest witnesses and apostles refused to follow Greek thought and that means the church was not willing to give the poets an entirely free hand. In any case, although it is true that a growing church, like the first century church, often produces its own hymnody, it is illegitimate to deduce from Paul's citation of one particular hymn that he had no right to check any hymnodic form of expression. Von Allmen's error in logic immediately becomes obvious when his argument is set out in syllogistic fashion:

- Poets preceded theologians like Paul.
- Paul approves a particular poem.
- Therefore no theologian has the right to call in question the content of any hymn.

In reality, to provide a competent assessment of how far the apostles were willing to step in and question the theological formulation (including the poetry) of others, it would be necessary to examine all that the New Testament has to say about heresy — a point to which I shall briefly return.

Thus to argue that "the way things happened in the primitive church teaches us that in the Church the life of faith is the primary thing" [31] is to obscure some important distinctions. In one sense, of course, this argument is valid: the early church was little interested in the niceties of theological argumentation for its own sake, but in life lived under the Lordship of Christ. But this life of faith did not perceive

"faith" to be exhaustively open-ended: it had an object, about which (or whom) certain things could be affirmed and other things denied. Indeed, I would argue that the church was interested in theological formulations, not for their intrinsic intellectual interest, but precisely because it rightly perceived that such formulations shaped and controlled much of the "life of faith" believers were expected to lead. In any case, von Allmen's conclusions in this regard seem to depend rather more on an existentialist hermeneutic than on his own exegesis.[32]

### **Questionable Christology: Three Criticisms**

Von Allmen's presentation of the development of Christology[33] is questionable at a number of points. I shall mention only three. First, the background on which he relies for his judgment reflects only one line of research, that of the history-of-religions school made popular in New Testament studies by such scholars as Reitzenstein and Bousset,[34] and mediated to us by Rudolf Bultmann and others. Not only is this line of scholarship in less favor today than it once was, its many intrinsic weaknesses have been made clear by significant publications which a commitment to evenhandedness might at least have mentioned. Brown, for example, has shown that the use of *mysterion* in the New Testament finds its closest antecedents not on Greek mystery religions but in a semitic milieu.[35] Again, it is not entirely clear that full-blown Gnosticism, as opposed to neoplatonic dualism, antedates the New Testament[36] but even if it does, the differences between it and the New Testament presentation of Christ's death are profound. And to what extent may the "in Christ" language reflect not Greek mysticism but forensic identification with Christ?[37]

Related to this is a second criticism. To what extent do the demonstrable developments in the ascription of labels and titles to Jesus of Nazareth reflect innovation removed from the historical actuality, and to what extent do they merely reflect clarified and growing understanding of what was in fact true -- an understanding mediated in part by the pressure of events,

including opposition? This sort of question von Allmen does not raise; but it is essential that we consider it if we are to understand what he himself means by developments that remain "faithful to the foundations of the faith." [38]

Consider, for instance, his treatment of *kurios*. There is little doubt that Paul understands "Jesus is Lord" to be a confession not only of Jesus' "lordship," i.e. his authority, but also of his identification with Yahweh, rendered *kurios* in the LXX. Was the apparent development from master/disciple relations ("my lord" meaning "rabbi" or the like) to full ascription of deity to Jesus in accord with or contrary to what Jesus himself was and is? If von Allmen would respond, "Contrary to," then certain things inevitably follow: (1) The truth of Christological confessions does not matter, but only the sincerity and naturalness to any culture of its own formulations. (2) Jesus himself should not be identified with Yahweh at any ontological or historical level, but only at the level of confessions which may or may not reflect reality. (3) "Remaining faithful to the foundations of the faith" can in this case only refer to existential commitment to an empty *dass*, not to "foundations of the faith" in any propositional or falsifiable sense. (4) How a culture responds to the gospel, i.e. with what degree of contextualization, is far more important than the content of the gospel proclaimed.

If, on the other hand, von Allmen would respond, "In accord with," then again certain things inevitably follow: (1) He holds that Jesus really was and is "Lord" as "Yahweh is Lord," even though some time elapsed before the disciples fully grasped this. (2) More broadly, he has in this case committed himself to what is sometimes called the "organic" view of the rise of Christology: i.e. the full-blown doctrine grew out of the truth dimly perceived but truly there in the beginning of Jesus' ministry. The development is one of understanding and formulation regarding what was, not

innovation and inventive explanation of what was not. (3) "Remaining faithful to the foundations of the faith" therefore has objective criteria, rendering some formulations unfaithful.. (4) The gospel itself includes true propositions and historical verities, and at all such points is non-negotiable, even if it clashes with some dearly held cultural prejudices.

Which answer, then, would von Allmen give? I am uncertain, for his essay does not make this clear. Perhaps it is a little troubling, however, to find him asking whether the adoption of **kurios** was "a fatal slip." His answer is that it was not "truckling" if it exposed believers to persecution. True enough but was it a fatal slip?

I myself hold to the "organic" view I outlined above and elsewhere I have sketched in the kind of growth in understanding that was involved.[39] It is arguable, for instance, that even in the parables Jesus tells in the synoptic gospels, the figure who clearly represents Jesus (in those parables where he is represented at all) is frequently a figure who in the Old Testament metaphorically stands for Yahweh (bridegroom, farmer, and eight others).[40] Certainly there is ample evidence that Jesus repeatedly applied to himself passages from the Old Testament that had reference to God. There even appears to be dominical sanction for using "Lord" in reference to Jesus (Matt. 21:3), even though it is very doubtful that the disciples understood all of this at the time. The question arises therefore whether the shift to Greek **kurios** was so very innovative after all, or largely the result of increased understanding of who Jesus truly was, in the light of his resurrection and ascension. And in any case, if the gospel was going to be preached in Greek at all, Greek terms had to be used. The crucial question, therefore, is whether the Greek terms used by Hellenistic believers were filled with pagan content, or with Christian content in harmony with the gospel truth transmitted. Von Allmen implicitly recognizes this when he points out that the "man"

in Phil.2:7 is not the "Original Man" of Gnostic mythology, regardless of the term's provenance. Context is more important as a determiner of meaning than is philosophical antecedent. Why can't the same insight be deployed in other cases?

Similar things may be asked about von Allmen's treatment of the slave/man parallel in Phil.2:7. Apart from the fact that here as elsewhere in his essay von Allmen sweeps the Greeks together into one undifferentiated structure of thought,[41] the question is whether the hymn's formulation says something untrue of Jesus. In fact, it does not put him in the condition of a slave "bound hand and foot in submission to all powerful Destiny." Although some Greek thought conceived of man's plight in such terms, the word for "slave" has no necessary overtones of such thought and in this context, the essence of Jesus' "slavery" is his voluntary refusal to exploit his equality with God [42] in order to become a man, not involuntary submission to inflexible and unavoidable Destiny. In what sense, therefore, has anything of substance in the gospel been changed by this Greek terminology?

A third criticism of von Allmen's questionable Christology relates to his use of vague language which blurs important distinctions. Paul, von Allmen says, "does not demand that doctrine should be in literal agreement with the primitive Christian preaching."[43] What does "literal" mean in this sentence: It cannot mean "verbal," since we have crossed from Aramaic to Greek. But what, then? Von Allmen simply says that "the doctrine must correspond to the inner thrust of the apostolic faith."[44] Note that he states not to the apostolic faith itself, but to its "inner thrust." We may ask how this inner thrust is to be isolated, or, to put it another way, who is to determine it. Calvin? Barth? Bultmann? Von Allmen? The only answer von Allmen gives here is that since "new hope is part of the inner thrust of the faith," therefore "eschatology is an essential element of Christian theology."[45] But

"eschatology" is a "slippery word"[46] in modern theology. In Bultmann's theology, it has nothing to do with the return of Jesus at the end of the age, the present inaugurated kingdom being finally consummated in a new heaven and a new earth. Rather, it is reduced to the tension in the existential moment of decision. Does von Allmen follow Bultmann, then, when he rhetorically asks, "Provided one reintroduces this moment of expectation, this eschatological tension, then why not use Greek terminology?"[47] Why not, indeed — provided it is the same eschatological structure as that of the historic gospel. But if this "eschatological tension" has been redefined as "this moment of expectation" by appealing to Bultmannian categories, the "inner thrust of the apostolic faith" appears to have come adrift. There is no longer any objective gospel at all; and appeal to "inner thrust" may simply hide infinite subjectivity. I am, again, uncertain where von Allmen stands in all this, or what he really thinks about Bultmann's reinterpretation of Pauline eschatology, because his language is so vague but I am persuaded his approach would do well to heed the wise assessment of Beker in this regard:

First Corinthians 15 provides us with an impressive example that the coherent center of the gospel is, for Paul, not simply an experiential reality of the heart or a Word beyond words that permits translation into a multitude of world views. Harry Emerson Fosdick's dictum about the gospel as an "abiding experience amongst changing world views", or Bultmann's demythologizing program for the sake of the kerygmatic address of the gospel, is in this manner not true to Paul's conception of the gospel. However applicable the gospel must be to a Gentile in his contingent situation, it does not tolerate a world view that cannot express those elements in the apocalyptic world view... that to Paul seem inherent in the truth of the gospel.... And far from considering the apocalyptic world view a husk or discardable frame, Paul insists that it belongs to the inalienable coherent core of the gospel.... It seems

that Paul sacrifices dialogical contingency to dogmatic necessity by imposing a particular world view on Hellenistic believers. And if Paul imposes a dogmatic interpretative scheme on the "core" of the gospel, he seems to require not only faith as *fiducia* but also faith as *assensus*.[48]

### Misunderstandings of Judaism and Hellenism

Von Allmen's overarching reconstruction of the development of early Christianity depends on a reductionistic schema that runs more or less in a straight line from Judaism to Hellenism. More careful work has shown how misleading this schema is.[49] Judaism was already impregnated with Hellenistic concepts and vocabulary. Almost certainly the apostles themselves were bi- or tri-lingual. At the same time, many New Testament documents (e.g. the Gospel of John) that had previously been classed as irremediably Hellenistic have been shown to have enormously close ties with conservative strands of Judaism.

The same point can be made by again referring to two observations already alluded to in this paper. First, there is no record of Hellenistic Jews being evangelized by Aramaic-speaking Jews. This is because the church was bilingual from its inception. It could scarcely be otherwise, considering that most if not all of the apostles came from Galilee. Even von Allmen's expression "the Aramaic-speaking apostles" is misleading for in all likelihood, both the Eleven and Paul were comfortable in both Aramaic and Greek. Of course, many Jews who became Christians during the first weeks and months after Pentecost were from the Diaspora and presumably most of these would not be fluent in Aramaic, but would be more at home in the Hellenistic world than would those who had spent all their lives in Palestine, even Galilee, but it was never the case that a purely Aramaic-speaking church had to learn Greek in order to reach out to Greek-speaking fellow Jews. For von Allmen

therefore to distinguish the Hellenistic wing of the church from the Aramaic wing as if the former were the freshly evangelized and therefore the exclusively "indigenous" church which alone could become "truly missionary" is to propound disjunctions with no historical base and which offer no direct parallels to modern problems in contextualization.

Second, we have seen that the really significant movement recorded in the New Testament documents is not from Judaism to Hellenism, linguistically and culturally considered, but from the old covenant to the new. This development had racial and cultural implications, but primarily because the old covenant was enacted between God and one particular race. Profound theological questions therefore had to be faced, in light of the new revelation brought by Jesus and confirmed and unpacked by the Holy Spirit in the early church. Modern problems of contextualization cannot in this regard be seen as parallel to the first expansion to Gentiles -- unless new revelation is claimed as the basis on which the modern expansion to new languages and cultures is taking place.

### 3. Broader Methodological Problems in von Allmen's Essay

There are two methodological problems in von Allmen's article that deserve separate consideration, one relatively minor and the other major.

#### Problems of Method: "Either/Or" Reasoning

The first problem is found in the frequent disjunctions that force the unwary reader to "either/or" reasoning when other options are not only available but are (arguably) preferable. For instance, von Allmen, [50] as we have seen, approves the work of Schlink, who by concentrating on the form of "God-talk" argues that "the basic structure of God-talk is not the doctrine of God

but the worship of God." Quite apart from the question as to the relation between form and content (a notoriously difficult subject), this conclusion is far too disjunctive: doctrine or worship. After all, even in worship the worshiper has some notion of the God he is worshiping and therefore unless that notion is completely ineffable, he has some doctrine of God. Even the postulate "God is utterly ineffable" is in fact a doctrinal statement. It is logically impossible to be involved in worshiping God or a god without a doctrine of God, even if that doctrine is not very systematic, mature, well-articulated or for that matter even true. Meanwhile von Allmen's approval of the Schlink disjunction has done its damage by giving the impression that so long as there is worship, doctrine really doesn't matter and can safely be relegated to a very late stage of development. The kernel of truth in his analysis is that it is possible to have doctrine without being involved in worship — a pathetic and tragic state indeed but that does not mean the converse is possible, let alone ideal.

Or again, to take another example, von Allmen concludes: "Even amidst the fiercest polemic, Paul remains firmly rooted in the basis of the Christian faith: Christ who died and was raised. It is only from this centre that one may dare to say anything at all...." [51] Now the first of these two sentences is true. Indeed we may go further and insist that Paul's understanding of Christ's resurrection will not compromise over such matters as a genuinely empty tomb and a resurrection body that could be touched and seen. It is certainly true that this is one of the cornerstones of the faith Paul preaches. But it is going too far to use this non-negotiable truth as the sole criterion by which all must be judged. True, no aspect of genuine Christianity can temper with this central truth, or fly in its face but it is not true that this is the only non-negotiable for Paul — as if, provided a person holds to this center, all else is for the apostle negotiable. That is demonstrably not true. The eschatological error

in Thessalonica, or the assorted moral errors in Corinth, are not resolved by simple reference to Christ's death and resurrection yet Paul is adamant about the proper resolution of these matters as well. Indeed, as von Allmen has phrased things, someone might believe that Jesus died and rose from the dead exactly as did Lazarus, and still be holding to the "centre." But Paul would not agree for Christ's death and resurrection is qualitatively different from all others. If so, we must say in what way (e.g. his was the death of God's son it was an atoning death his body after the resurrection was different from his pre-death body along the line of I Cor. 15, etc.) and by saying in what way we are admitting other non-negotiables, other matters essential to Christian faith. The implicit disjunction (only from this center, from nowhere else) suddenly begins to fray around the edges.

#### **Problems of Method: Sacrificing the Content of the Gospel for a Process of Contextualization**

But there is a far more important methodological problem with von Allmen's work. At the beginning of his essay, he sets out to show that the creation of an African theology is both necessary and possible "on the basis of a true fidelity to the New Testament." [52] In a sense that I shall shortly elucidate, I entirely agree that an African theology is both necessary and possible. But von Allmen's way of establishing what is in "true fidelity to the New Testament" is not the way most readers of the New Testament would judge such fidelity and therefore it needs to be clearly understood.

Von Allmen does not attempt to justify his position on the basis of what the New Testament documents say, but on the basis of his reconstruction of their development. The authority lies not in the content of the Scriptures, but in von Allmen's understanding of the doctrinal changes those Scriptures reflect. This is manifest not only in the thrust of von Allmen's essay, but especially in its conclusion: "Rather than teach a

theology (even a theology that claims to be a 'New Testament theology')," he writes, "what we should try to do is point out what the forces were that governed the elaboration of a theology on the basis of the material furnished by the primitive church."<sup>[53]</sup> The "material furnished by the primitive church" can only be a reference to the New Testament documents (and perhaps also to other early Christian literature) so von Allmen is saying that we should not attempt to teach the content of these documents, but restrict ourselves only to deductions about the forces that generated the elaborations found in these documents. And what is in conformity with von Allmen's understanding of these forces is precisely what he says is in "fidelity to the New Testament". In reality, of course, his theory is not in fidelity to the New Testament, but to his deductions about the forces that shaped the New Testament for as we have seen, these deductions frequently run counter to what the New Testament documents actually say.

More troubling yet is von Allmen's confidence regarding the objectivity and reliability of the scholarly reconstruction he sets forward as the core of the new curriculum. But I shall let that point pass for the moment to focus a little more clearly on the cardinal difference between Byang Kato and Daniel von Allmen. In brief, it is the source of authority in Christianity. Both profess allegiance to Jesus Christ as Lord. But what Jesus? The Jesus of the Jehovah's witnesses? The Jesus of von Harnack? The Jesus of Islam? For Kato, it is the Jesus of the New Testament, because for him the New Testament documents are authoritative. Therefore every religious claim or precept must be tested against that standard. For von Allmen, it is not entirely clear how the confession "Jesus is Lord" is filled with content and although he appeals to the New Testament, in reality he is appealing to his reconstruction of the forces that shaped it. That reconstruction serves as the supreme paradigm for an endless succession of further reconstructions, and in that sense gains some

authority. But the documents themselves, in their actual content, are stripped of authority. A person might therefore confess "Jesus is Lord" but mean something very different from what Paul means. Doesn't this matter? Von Allmen seems to want to defend a core of gospel truth as one of the final criteria but it is not clear how that core can avoid endless changes in content, making it no core at all but the proverbial peeled onion.

The same sort of problem appears in Kraft.[54] Basing himself on von Allmen's article, Kraft assigns Luther's description of James as an "epistle of straw" to Luther's "unconscious ethnocentrism,"[55] without struggling with Luther's later growth in understanding both of the gospel and of the nature of the canon.[56] The point, according to Kraft, is that the Bible is a "divine casebook" that embraces many different models of appropriate religion, each in its own way reflecting the non-negotiable core. Different cultures will feel most at home with this part or that part of the Bible, and prefer to overlook or ignore other parts. Luther found Paul congenial, and was uncomfortable with James. Well and good, Kraft argues: let each culture choose those parts that speak to it most clearly. This diversity produces many different theologies; and, writes Kraft:

We need to ask which of these varieties of theology branded "heretical" were genuinely out of bounds (measured by scriptural standards), and which were valid contextualizations of scriptural truth within varieties of culture or subculture that the party in power refused to take seriously. It is likely that most of the "heresies" can validly be classed as cultural adaptations rather than as theological aberrations. They, therefore, show what ought to be done today rather than what ought to be feared. The "history of traditions" becomes intensely relevant when studied from this perspective.[57]

Note, then, that the "scriptural standards" to which

Kraft refers are not what the Bible as a whole says, but an array of disparate theologies each based on separate parts of the Bible, an array that sets the limits and nature of diverse traditions and their development. In treating the Bible as a "divine casebook" Kraft is very close to von Allmen in the way he conceives of biblical authority.

#### Difficulties in Von Allmen's View of the Bible: Theoretical, Practical and Cultural

At the risk of oversimplification, I would argue that there are three difficulties in von Allmen's conception (as a divine casebook of conflicting theologies). The first is theoretical: i.e. is this the way that biblical authority is to be perceived on the basis of its own witness? I would answer with a firm negative. Of course there were cultural forces at work in the development of the biblical books. But the question is whether God so superintended those forces that the Bible's documents are to be read not only as historical documents that reflect the progress of revelation in redemptive history but also as a whole, not merely as case studies but as a divinely ordered progression that results in a unity of thought, a world in which there is prophecy and fulfillment, type and antitype, dark saying and clearer explication, diverse styles and genres and languages but a complementarity of thought — all resulting in the possibility of finding unambiguous biblical truth for many kinds of doctrinal, ethical, and intellectual matters, not simply disparate biblical truths. I have dealt with the matter at length elsewhere,[58] and shall refrain from repeating myself here.

The second problem is practical. It is true, as Kraft says, that every culture finds certain parts of the Bible more congenial than others. On this basis Kraft seems to encourage each culture to operate with its own "canon within the canon." But this inevitably

means that the final authority rests, not in the Bible, but in the culture. The canon comes to lose all canonical authority. If a society is polygamous, it may follow Abraham or David (Kraft's example) but then why not follow, in some other culture, Mosaic law regarding slaves, stoning, temple ritual and the bitter-water rite? How about wiping out entire peoples? A Hitler might find such accounts and commands very congenial. On the other hand, does any society find the sermon on the mount congenial? The problem is not only how the Old Testament passages to which I've just referred relate to later revelation (part of the first problem, above), but also how the Bible can ever have any prophetic bite or force at all. In my understanding of the canon, the preacher who is sensitive to the cultural sensibilities of his hearers will not only exploit their canonical preferences, and seek to relate the parts of the Bible into a self-consistent whole, he will also take extra pains to preach, teach and apply, within this canonical framework, those parts of Scripture his hearers find least palatable. Otherwise no prophetic word will ever be heard, no correction of culture, no objective canonical balance.

The third problem concerns the nature of von Allmen's appeal to a core gospel which he does not see as culturally negotiable, or, to use Kraft's expression, the "supracultural truth" of the core. But I shall return to this problem in the next section.

#### **4. Reflections on von Allmen's Three Impasses**

##### **The Impasse of Paternalism**

The first impasse to a truly African theology, in von Allmen's view, is paternalism. There is real insight here. We have all witnessed or heard about those horrible situations where a Western missionary squelches the honest probing of an African student who was questioning the missionary's interpretation of Scripture at

some point. The put-down might have been in terms like these: "What right do you have to question the interpretation? This is the product of two thousand years of study and thought. Your business is to go and learn it." May God forgive all teachers who employ such tactics, especially those who do so in the name of the authority of Scripture while unwittingly elevating tradition above Scripture. Moreover, von Allmen is wise to point out the inverted power structures when we compare the first century with the twentieth.

Nevertheless, von Allmen's solution — simply to let Africans get on with it, offering neither criticism nor encouragement (because that too is a reflection of paternalism), but simply trust — is in my view not nearly radical enough. Unwittingly it falls into a new kind of paternalism. While theologians in the West are busily engaged in cut and thrust among themselves, is it not a kind of inverted paternalism that declares a respectful "hands off" policy to African theologians and biblical scholars? Surely it is far better to enter into debate with them. The real problem lies in the heart attitude. The solution is the grace of God in the human life, grace that enables African and Westerners alike to learn from and criticize each other without scoring cheap shots or indulging in one-up-manship. Certainly some of the most forthright and thought-provoking discussions I have ever enjoyed have been with colleagues from around the world who were brought together for concentrated study and interaction under the auspices of the World Evangelical Fellowship's Theological Commission.

### The Impasse of Fear of Heresy

The second impasse to a truly African theology, in von Allmen's view, is a fear of heresy. Certainly there is a great danger in this area, found not least in Western missionaries whose zeal is great but whose knowledge is slim. But von Allmen gravely underestimates

the seriousness with which heresy is taken in the New Testament, and overestimates the amount of diversity there.[59] At what point, for instance, can von Allmen sympathize and empathize with the sentiments expressed in Matt. 7:21-23; John 3:36; Acts 4:12; Gal.1:8,9; II Tim.2:17-19; Rev.21:6-9? Even Paul's famous "all things to all men" (I Cor.9) unambiguously presupposes limits beyond which he is unprepared to go.[60]

Granted the truthfulness of Scripture and the rightness of the canonical approach I have briefly sketched in, Christians have not only the right but the responsibility to learn from and to correct one another on the basis of this agreed standard. This must not be in any witch-hunting or judgmental spirit but failure to discharge these responsibilities in a gracious and thoughtful way may not only reflect inverted paternalism but a singular indifference to the truth claims of "the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3).

#### **The Impasse of a Conservative View of Contextualization: The Impossibility of von Allmen's Radical View**

The third impasse in the way of a truly African theology, according to von Allmen, is the perception that contextualization must be merely the adaptation of an existing theology. Again, there is considerable insight here. Will that theology be truly African which simply takes, say, Hodge's *Systematic Theology* and seeks to rewrite it for some African context? Anyone who has thoughtfully worked cross-culturally for an extended period of time knows the answer to that question.

Nevertheless, von Allmen's solution, to foster a true *tabula rasa* and insist that a truly African theology can only flower when it emerges without reference to any existing theology, is impossible and (even if it were possible) unwise. It is impossible and unwise for four reasons.

## **Impossible To Teach Process But Not Content**

(1) It is impossible because a *tabula rasa* is impossible. If the new hermeneutic has taught us anything, it has taught us that. Even if we were to follow von Allmen's suggestion and teach only tools and the history of traditions, we would be conveying some theological content. Teaching Greek invariably includes Greek sentences from the New Testament and translating them entails theological decisions about the history and development of traditions as well as linguistic expertise. Moreover, one cannot talk about the traditions themselves. Even initial evangelization and church planting could not possibly have been accomplished by conveying no more than "Christ died and rose again." And in any case, even what one does not teach is teaching something. If a lecturer refuses to discuss, say, the interpretation of Romans or the language used of the atonement, he or she will invariably appear to be hiding something, thus conveying something distasteful -- e.g. that such matters are religiously unimportant, or frightening, or too difficult.

## **There Is No Supracultural Core**

(2) It is impossible because there is no core of gospel truth in the sense defended by Kraft.[61] They both treat the Scriptures as having only casebook authority, examining it for every hint of cultural development, while nevertheless insisting that there is an undissolved core of indispensable gospel truth, a supracultural truth. On the one hand, this is far too radical; on the other, it is not nearly radical enough. It is too radical, I have argued, because it reduces the locus of non-negotiable truth to one or two propositions such as "Jesus is Lord" or "Christ died and rose again," when in fact the corpus of non-negotiable truth embraces all of Scripture: that is the database from which

theological reflection must take its substance and controls. But now I wish to argue that their position is not radical enough, in that it seems to think these core or supracultural confessions escape all restrictions of culture and that is demonstrably untrue.

Consider, for example, the sentence "Jesus' is Lord." We might all agree that no Christianity is possible where this three-word sentence is denied. But to a Hindu, the sentence might be happily accommodated within his syncretistic framework. To a Buddhist, it would mean Jesus is inferior to Gautama the Buddha, for it still predicates something of Jesus. To a Jehovah's Witness, there is no entailment regarding Jesus' deity. And to an existentialist, the sentence is a mythological expression designed to call us to the decisions that characterize authentic existence.

My point is that from the perspective of human perception and formulation there is no supracultural core. However the heart of the gospel be conceived by human beings, it is conceived in a particular linguistic, cultural, philosophical and religious framework. Only God is supracultural. But this does not relativize the gospel. Far from it: it simply means that the supracultural personal God, in order to communicate with his finite and culture-bound sinful creatures, necessarily had to accommodate the form of his communication to their space-time limitations, their historical contingencies. This does not entail the relativizing of the truth but it does mean that if any person is to understand the culturally conditioned Scriptures and apply them aright, he must, as part of the exercise, seek to shape his own horizon of understanding to that of the cultures and languages of Scripture, and then make the transfer back to his own environment.[62] To put the matter another way, I must find out what "Jesus is Lord" means in the Greek New Testament, how it functions, how it is coordinated with other truth, and then seek to confess the same truth in my own language and culture -- even if it takes a paragraph instead of a

three-word sentence, or a complete overturning of my conceptual framework (as, in this case, must happen to, say, the Buddhist).

But if this is so, there is no intrinsic philosophical reason why the entire New Testament cannot be seen (as it claims to be) as a definitive and true revelation, even if all of it is, in the sense I've just explained, culture-bound.[63] But it does mean that the appeal of von Allmen, Kraft and others is epistemologically and hermeneutically naive.

### Von Allmen's Own Dogmatism Imposes Itself

(3) It is unwise because von Allmen, thinking his proposed *tabula rasa* is possible, and his particular reconstruction of gospel traditions neutral, is in fact promulgating his own brand of theology, while honestly but mistakenly thinking he is above the fray. No blindness is worse than that which thinks it sees (compare John 9:39-41). Is it not obvious that even as Western evangelical missionaries may impose their theological frameworks on their converts, so Western missionaries of more "liberal" persuasion may impose their skepticism and relativism on theirs?[64] Far better is it to admit these tendencies, and become aware of the limitations these inevitabilities impose on the cross-cultural missionary.

### Neglect Of The Third Horizon – The Modern

(4) It is unwise because it fails to grapple with the third horizon. Modern debate over hermeneutics commonly speaks of the two horizons: there is "the horizon of understanding" of the text, and there is "the horizon of understanding" of the reader or interpreter. The horizon of understanding of the latter will be roughly similar to that of the interpreter's colleague in his own culture so when the interpreter has fused the horizon of his own understanding with that of the text (to use the modern jargon), and learned to think through

the meaning of the text in his own language and cultural framework, he can easily communicate his findings to his colleague. Of course, his own understanding may still need considerable correction, revision, deepening and so forth; but for the sake of simplifying the argument, let us suppose that he is substantially right in his understanding of the text, the "fusion" operation having been responsibly carried out. If this interpreter now wishes to communicate his findings to a person in another culture, he faces a third horizon: viz. the horizon of understanding of this "target" person. To communicate accurately the substance of what he has learned, the interpreter, who has now become a witness or preacher, must use the horizon of his own understanding with that of his hearer — i.e. he must learn a new culture. The truth he wishes to convey must then be passed on in the words and actions and parameters of that language and culture. That is one of the things that makes an effective missionary. In time, the new hearer, now a convert, learns to fuse the horizon of his understanding with that of the biblical text and because he likely knows his own culture better than the missionary ever will, he has the potential, all things being equal, to become a far clearer and more effective witness and theologian in his own culture than the missionary does.

One problem, or course, is that the missionary may unwittingly intrude a lot of his own cultural baggage into the gospel he is preaching. But that substantial truth can be conveyed across cultures is demonstrated by both von Allmen and Kraft themselves: they are read, and understood, by Africans and Westerners alike. A second problem is that the new convert may have unwittingly picked up some of this unnecessary baggage from the missionary. But it is precisely in fostering the fusion of the convert's horizon of understanding with that of the biblical text, which both missionary and convert agree is the basis of authority for their shared faith, that there is a possibility of the convert's divesting himself of these unwise and sometimes unwit-

ting accretions, a possibility of developing a genuinely contextualized theology.

In fact, the model can become far more complex yet, because (in theory at least) each generation of believers tries to grapple with the way the gospel given in the Bible has been understood in other ages, branches and cultures in the history of the church and this involves still more fusing of horizons if true understanding is to be gained. That is what makes a competent historian. Moreover, von Allmen frequently speaks of a genuine African theology over against Western theology, as if these two labels represent undifferentiated wholes; whereas in fact there are many different Western theologies (not to mention cultures and languages) and even more African theologies (and cultures and languages). But cross-cultural communication is possible, even if rarely approaching perfection, as communicators accept the responsibility of tackling the third (and fourth, etc.) horizon.

In short, reflection on the third horizon, which relates to the missionary responsibility of the church, sheds light on the relation between the first two horizons, and renders invalid all theories that depend on the possibility that humans can formulate supracultural truth. This means either that there can be no gospel at all (which of course von Allmen would not say), or that the locus of revealed and propositional truth must include far more than the restricted core some are advancing.

## 5. Concluding Reflections: Four Guidelines For African Evangelical Contextualizing

Where, then, does all this leave us? What is genuinely contextualized theology that is faithful to the gospel preserved and proclaimed in Scripture, and how do we foster it?

I should first set out what I mean by contextualization. In the past, many missionaries of large spirit and vision spoke of the importance of the indigenization of the church. By this they meant to stress that national churches needed to develop their own leadership, support themselves financially, develop their own patterns of and responsibility for self-propagation, remain within the cultural stream of their own architecture and music, and so forth. "Contextualization" goes beyond this in applying such principles to problems of biblical interpretation and theological expression: i.e. the Word of God needs to be "contextualized" in each culture.[65]

In many ways, this is surely right. Precisely because each culture approaches the Scriptures with its own set of prejudices and blinkers, it will be able to see, and (initially at any rate) be prevented from seeing, certain things that another culture might respond to (or fail to respond to) in quite a different way. For this reason, not only every culture, but ideally every generation in every culture (especially in those cultures that are undergoing rapid transition), must get involved in its own Bible study, and learn to express biblical truth in and apply it to its own context. In this light African theology, indeed many African theologies, are both necessary and possible.

But from the drift of the argument here, I would delimit that contextualization of theology by four considerations:

#### **Theology Must Be Based On The Whole Bible**

First, the "given" is Scripture. Of course, other things are no less important: prayer, humility, personal knowledge of the Savior, enthusiastic submission to the Lord Jesus Christ, and more; but the "given" data on which any truly Christian church must base its theology is the Word of God. How this model of theology

is related to the problem of the "hermeneutical circle" has been worked out elsewhere.[66] But a truly contextualized theology is, in my view, one in which believers from a particular culture seek to formulate a comprehensive theology in the language and categories of their own culture, but based on the whole Bible itself. In doing so, they will want to be informed about many other attempts in other languages and cultures but the direct line of control is from Scripture. In one sense, therefore, I agree with von Allmen that theology has not been properly contextualized if it simply tries to take over the effort of some other culture. But this does not entail the abandonment of all contact with other theologies which is impossible, but only that the line of direct control must be from Scripture.

Arguably, the thing that has tripped up von Allmen in his understanding of contextualization is his sub-biblical grasp of the Bible. For whenever there is an attempt to build a theology on an alleged supracultural core, or on an entirely non-propositional revelation (the Bible being nothing but a faulty witness to that revelation),[67] the inevitable result is that the real line of authority lies elsewhere: in the presupposed philosophy (articulated or otherwise), or in the standards and world-view of the culture, or in the preferences of the theologian. Western Christendom has generated its liberal Jesus, its Marxist Jesus, its Mormon Jesus, its unknown but existentialist Jesus, and so forth but from the perspective of the Christian who believes that the Scriptures are authoritative, the core problem behind these reductionist and faddish theologies is their abandonment of the biblical givens. Uncontrolled and speculative subjectivity is the inevitable result, even though each siren theology proclaims itself as the answer. Similarly, if we now cultivate various, say, African, Scottish, Indian and Burmese theologies, while abandoning the authority of Scripture, we have merely multiplied the subjectivity and speculation of the enterprise and none of these efforts will prove very enduring, because at no level will they mesh with the

central heritage of biblical Christianity, however expressed in diverse cultures. But if by African, Scottish, Indian and Burmese theologies we are referring to attempts by nationals to work directly from Scripture in order to construct a biblically controlled theology each for his own language, culture and generation, the enterprise cannot be too highly lauded and encouraged and the result in each case will mesh substantially with other efforts elsewhere, once their respective "horizons of understanding" have been fused. And where there are disagreements that are not purely linguistic or cultural about what the Scriptures actually say, then at least in this case there is a common, recognized authority that renders further joint study and discussion possible and potentially profitable.

#### **Historical Theology is Indispensable**

Second, the study of historical theology is a well-nigh indispensable element in the task. As I have already indicated, it strikes me as a kind of inverted paternalism to give Western students substantial doses of historical theology, including the study of theology in many languages and cultures not their own, and then advocate keeping such information from (say) African students. Yet historical theology should not be taught as if it were normative, but should be constantly assessed both culturally and against the norm of Scripture. In other words, while von Allmen wants to assess streams of inner canonical tradition, as he reconstructs them, against the minimalistic, supracultural gospel he judges to be normative, I want to assess post-canonical streams of tradition against the "given" of the canon itself. Such study invariably widens the options, generates care in biblical interpretation, exposes the thoughtful student to his own blind spots, and enables him to detect patterns of genuine continuity, frequent doctrinal and ethical sources of contention or objects of disbelief, and so forth.

#### **Different Cultures Can Learn From Each Other**

Third, it follows therefore that a Christian in, say, Lagos, Nigeria and another in Oslo, Norway do not have to pass each other as ships in the night. They will of course construct their theologies along quite different lines, using different languages, metaphors, genres, and so forth. But once the linguistic and cultural barriers between them have been substantially overcomeeeeis the case when one of the two learns the language and culture of the other), enabling them to communicate fairly freely, there is no intrinsic reason why these two Christians should not sit down and, with patient probing, not only learn from each other but be corrected by each other — precisely because each of them has learned to fuse his own horizon of understanding with that of the Scriptures both hold to be normative. The African, for instance, might expose the unbiblical individualism of his European counterpart, and show how much of the biblical language of the church is "family" language — points on which the European may have been insensitive. On the other hand, the European may challenge the African to ask if his understanding of family solidarity may not have been carried too far — perhaps by introducing elements of ancestor worship into his theology, even though such worship has no sanction in Scripture.[68] It thus becomes important for every cultural group to "do theology" not only for its own sake but also because each will contribute something valuable to the worldwide understanding of biblical truth. But the exchanges must ultimately be reciprocal: and it must be recognized that the authority which corrects every culture is the Word of God.

### **Western Theology Should Encourage**

Fourth, it follows that, in contrast to von Allmen's view, there is no reason why Westerners should not encourage Africans to develop their own theology — just as there is no reason why Africans should not encourage us to do a far better job of developing our own.

The aim must always be to develop indigenous, contextualized Christianity that is in hearty submission to Scripture, growing in its understanding of and obedience to God's Word. If this means, in the West, that we must re-think our tendencies toward, say, skepticism, individualism, an arrogant sense of racial superiority, and materialism, is Byang Kato so wrong when he warns believers in his own context of their dangers of falling into syncretism, universalism and Christo-paganism? Why should it be thought that the Bible can be wielded as a prophetic sword over Western culture and not over African culture?

The struggle between the views of Kato and von Allmen do not ultimately turn only on the way contextualization should proceed, but even more on the authority of Scripture and as such, the debate is a reflection of a similar struggle throughout Christendom -- one which, ironically, is fueled even more by the West's rationalism than by post-colonial nationalism.

Notes

- [1] Daniel von Allmen, "The Birth of Theology: Contextualization as the dynamic element in the formation of New Testament theology," IRM 64 (1975) pp 37-52. This work has been frequently mentioned or discussed by missiologists, and has appeared as well in important reprints: e.g. see Charles H. Kraft and Tom N. Wisbey, ed., *Readings in Dynamic Indigenity* (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1979).
- [2] Byang Kato, *Theological Trends in Africa Today* (WEF Theological News, Monograph 6; April, 1973).
- [3] Kato p. 1. [4] Von Allmen p. 37 (emphasis his).
- [5] von Allmen p. 38. [6] von Allmen p. 38.
- [7] von Allmen [8] von Allmen p. 39.
- [9] von Allmen [10] von Allmen p. 40.
- [11] von Allmen p. 41. [12] von Allmen
- [13] Edmund Schlink, "Die Methode des dogmatischen ökumenischen Dialogs," KD 12 (1966) 209.
- [14] Von Allmen, basing himself on P. Wendland, *Die hellenistisch-comische Kultur* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1912) pp. 104-106.
- [15] von Allmen, referring to J. Gnilka, *Der Philipperbrief* (Freiburg: Herder, 1966) pp. 131-147.
- [16] von Allmen [17] von Allmen
- [18] von Allmen p. 44 [19] von Allmen p. 46
- [20] von Allmen p. 45 [21] von Allmen p. 47
- [22] von Allmen p. 48 [23] von Allmen p. 29
- [24] von Allmen [25] von Allmen p. 50

[26] von Allmen p. 51

[27] Harry R. Boer, *Pentecost and Missions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966).

[28] Von Allmen p. 39.

[29] For general discussions on Jewish proselytizing in this period, see B. J. Bamberger, *Proselytism in the Talmudic Period* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union, 1939); W. G. Braude, *Jewish Proselytizing in the First Five Centuries of the Common Era* (Providence, R.I. : Brown University Press, 1940); F. M. Derwacter, *Preparing the Way for Paul: The Proselyte Movement in Later Judaism* (New York: Macmillan, 1930); D. Georgi, *Die Gegner des Paulus im 2. Korintherbrief* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1964); and on this particular point, see esp. W. Paul Bowers, "Studies in Paul's Understanding of His Mission" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Cambridge University, 1976).

[30] von Allmen p. 44

[31] von Allmen

[32] See the assessment of von Allmen by Bruce J. Nicholls, *Contextualization: A Theology of Gospel and Culture* (Outreach and Identity: Evangelical Theological Monographs No. 3; WEF Theological Commission; Exeter: Paternoster, 1979).

[33] Von Allmen esp. p. 40-46

[34] Esp. R. Reitzenstein, *Der hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen nach ihrem Grundgedanken und Wirkungen* (2nd. ed'n; Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1920); Wilhelm Bousset, *Kurios Christos: Geschichte des Christusglaubens von den Anfängen des Christentums bis Irenaeus* (2nd ed'n; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1921).

[35] R.E. Brown, *The Semitic Background of the Term "Mystery" in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968).

[36] Cf. Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidences* (London: Tyndale, 1973); idem, "Some

"Alleged Evidences for Pre-Christian Gnosticism," in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker and Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974) 46-70; idem, "Pre-Christian Gnosticism in the Nag Hammadi Texts?" *Church History* 48 (1979) 129-141; and the literature he cites.

[37] See the discussion by Peter Stuhlmacher, *Gerechtigkeit Gottes bei Paulus* (2nd ed'n; Gottingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1966).

[38] His expression, "Birth," 41.

[39] Cf. D. A. Carson, "Understanding Misunderstandings in the Fourth Gospel," *TynBull* 33 (1982) 59-91; idem, "Christological Ambiguities in the Gospel of Matthew," in *Christ the Lord* (Festschrift Donald Guthrie; ed. Harold Rowdon; Leicester: IVP, 1982) 97-114.

[40] Cf. Philip Barton Payne, "Jesus' Implicit Claim to Deity in His Parables," *TrinJ* 2 (1981) 3-23.

[41] There were of course many quite different positions or schools of thought in the Greco-Roman world. For instance, Lucretius, a Roman largely dependent on the Greek Democritus, was a thoroughgoing materialist.

[42] See esp. the frequently overlooked article by Roy W. Hoover, "The Harpagmos Enigma: A Philological Solution," *HTR* 64 (1971) 95-119.

[43] von Allmen p. 46 [44] von Allmen

[45] von Allmen

[46] The expression is that of I. Howard Marshall, "Slippery Words: I. Eschatology," *ExpT* 89 (1977-78) 264-269.

[47] Von Allmen p. 46

[48] J. Christian Becker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 170.

[49] Cf. *inter alia* I. Howard Marshall, "Palestinian and Hellenistic Christianity: Some Critical Comments," NTS 19 (1972-73) 271-287; and esp. Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period* (London: SCM, 1974).

[50] von Allmen p. 41

[51] von Allmen p. 47

[52] von Allmen p. 37

[53] von Allmen p. 51

[54] See, for instance, Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), esp. 232-233, 286-287, 295-297.

[55] Kraft p. 232

[56] On recent treatments of Luther's attitude to the Scriptures, cf. Eugene F. Klug, "Word and Scripture in Luther Studies since World War II," *TrinJ* 5 (1984) [forthcoming].

[57] Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* 296 (emphasis his).

[58] Cf. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, ed., *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), esp. the essay "Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: The Possibility of Systematic Theology."

[59] Carson; and cf. I. Howard Marshall, "Orthodoxy and heresy in earlier Christianity," *Themelios* 2/1 (1976) 5-14.

[60] Cf. D. A. Carson, "Pauline Inconsistency: Reflections on I Corinthians 9.19-23 and Galatians 2:11-14," *NovT* [forthcoming].

[61] *Christianity in Culture* 296-297.

[62] For the best discussion, cf. Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Exeter: Paternoster / Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979).

[63] Cf. D. A. Carson, "The Limits of Dynamic Equivalence," *ERT* [forthcoming].

[64] Many examples could be cited. For instance, one major brand of liberation theology has strong roots in Marxism -- originally a European philosophy.

[65] I here follow one common use of "contextualization," recently and ably discussed by Martin Goldsmith, "Contextualization of theology," *Themelios* 9/1 (1983) 18-23.

[66] Cf. n.59, *supra*.

[67] E.g. V. E. Devadutt, "What is an Indigenous Theology?" in *Readings in Dynamic Indigeneity*, ed. Charles H. Kraft and Tom N. Wisbey (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1979) 313-324.

[68] See the important discussion by Tite Tianou, "The Church in African Theology: Description and Hermeneutical Analysis," in *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: Text and Context*, ed. D. A. Carson (Exeter: Paternoster, 1984).