Introductory Essay

BY LAMIN SANNEH

The writings of Roland Allen (1868-1947), an English missionary who served in China from 1895 under the auspices of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG), suffer from a fault that would be the envy of most writers: they are a casualty of their own farsighted brilliance. In a deeply ironic way Allen was the unruly child of a post-Christian West and the thwarted voice of a post-Western Christianity. Ill-health forced him to return to England in 1903 after a brief missionary spell in China. His career in China was effectively cut short by the fallout of the Boxer Rebellion of 1900. Yet Allen felt no longer at ease in his own country, and so, after briefly serving in parish work, he emigrated to Kenya where his son lived. He died in Kenya in June, 1947.

Allen wrote fluently on missionary methods and principles as well as on the philosophy of cross-cultural mission. He offered critical reflections on the role of civilization and the enlightenment in Christianity in general, and in missions in particular. Without realizing it, Allen had set out to delineate the course of post-Western Christianity at a time when the church and his contemporaries thought almost exclusively in Christendom terms. That he did so with such undeviating consistency and unflagging commitment is testimony to his unique talents and Christian gifts. He was a voice crying in the wilderness, a prophet without honour in his own country. And yet the future which he shaped by his ideas, one to which he by right belonged for having so keenly discerned it and so eloquently given it expression arrived too late to claim him and to be claimed by him. It should not be that way if the church is the one unbroken continuous stream of witnesses that the apostles bequeathed. It was to the church that Allen looked for the work of the Holy Spirit, and at its door that he laid his rare gifts of indomitable faith and toughness of mind. Or, then again, perhaps it should, for nothing can separate the faithful in the love of Christ.

When he criticized the nature of Europe's engagement with the Gospel Allen meant no dishonour to his country or to the Western heritage whose greatness he never minimized or misrepresented. He was restless about the glaring gap he saw between the church's stated objectives and the conflicting means used to reach those objectives. He was all too aware, and deeply troubled, too, by the easy assumption that mission and colonial rule were ordained co-partners in a joint enterprise, and he turned that restlessness into a searching critique of that association. For him mission was the work of the spirit, not just in the flaky sense of bustling excitement and uncontrolled enthusiasm but in the sense of openness to the mind of Christ and to the witness of the apostles, especially to that of Paul. Europe's chronological ascendancy in the expansion of Christianity held little weight for Allen because for him New Testament eschatology was not beholden to such rules of historical preference.

That root theological conviction enabled Allen to transcend his own cultural limitations and, equally momentously, enabled him to see a natural bridge between New Testament Christianity and the missionary enterprise in China and elsewhere beyond the West. The fundamental basis of human identity for Allen was not cultural but theological. Human beings are first and last subjects of God's redemptive work in Christ, and their cultural state carries no prior moral entitlement or disqualification.

It was that radical religious anthropology that made Allen uneasy with what he called the cultural righteousness of the West. It was a righteousness that was in scandalous breach of apostolic faith and practice but also in political conflict with the rights of access to the Gospel of non-Western populations. Allen said the situation was eerily evocative of the Gentile controversy in the early church. He said it was extraordinary that the Gentile breakthrough should be reconstructed by Western missions to say that just as the Gentiles were broken off bits of the synagogue, so should Third World churches be seen as broken off bits of Christian Europe. It was that deliberate distortion of the New Testament that led missions to fixate on giving a European rather than a Christian justification for their work. When Europeans went abroad as missionaries they thought of

themselves in the first place as going to people they regarded as heathen. The question for missionaries was how they should relate to the heathen social order, and that cultural question took precedence over any religious or theological questions.

Missionaries, for instance, decided that it was impossible for them to dwell among the people and to share their life. It would have seemed like sharing the sinful life of unredeemed heathen even if it was physically feasible to do so. Europeans could not be nomads, wandering teachers, passing from village to village, pausing here a while, and there a while, to instruct any who cared to listen to them. Instead, missionaries settled permanently, acquired land, built houses, and established mission stations somewhat removed from the people. To these quarantined stations missionaries brought their wives and established their families.

Conversion to Christianity was conceived in similar terms. To educate and to civilize local people meant to inculcate in them the taste for European cultural habits and the skill to make European style houses and other artifacts. Technical ability and the accompanying economic affluence would lead to the proliferation of modern houses, which in turn would lead to the multiplication of Christian families wishing to live in those houses. The existence of the house was far more important than anything that happened in the native village. Before any converts arrived, the house was there. The success of Christian mission would thereby be assured, and easy to measure and count. One could plan for it on the basis of precise, rational projections.

Converts or Clients?

This concentration on missionary life as the model Christian life required converts to be dislodged from their cultural system and to be cast on the goodwill of missionaries. Converts suffered a double jeopardy. They were uprooted from their culture only to be cast adrift on the fringes of the missionary community as adopted clients. Suddenly and unexpectedly, converts found themselves bogged down in an untenable contradiction, for the very qualifications missionaries established for them undermined their credibility in society.

Utterly deaf to local voices, missionaries persisted with the old certitudes by assembling an experimental community by artificial selection. The brightest and fittest students would rise to the top in mission schools, to be creamed off for recruitment into various branches of missionary service. The cycle would be self-generating and self-sustaining, except that it would not be self-supporting or self-reliant.

Evidence of Western obstruction and local resistance could be had from examples of converts who were rejected, driven from their homes or villages, and otherwise stigmatized. Cut adrift in the cross-currents of an assertive European political order and a rising local reaction, converts became marginal. Persons cannot live without some social order, and converts were stripped of their roots in their own society. They once had a home. Now, thanks to Christianity, they had none. Their communities disgorged them, and missionaries received them with tongue firmly in cheek. Christianity dispossessed them of their natural ties without giving them a real stake in missionary culture. The new civilization centered on the mission compound had no root, and when converts flocked to these compounds they were as driftwood. The missionaries taught them standards of cleanliness and hygiene, imbued them with polite manners and mild sentiments, and put them in European clothes, but instead of feeling honored and appreciated they felt violated and mocked. After all, that was not their culture, and they could ill afford to claim it on any other ground. European civilization became the religion's trap, and their's, too. In China, for example, an idea took root and quickly spread that to become a Christian involved submission to foreign domination. That belief had a powerful effect in deterring people from approaching the missionary or from receiving missionary teaching with open minds. (Allen, *Missionary Methods*, 1927, 78.)

In time an earthquake rocked Christianity's cultural foundations when predictably the nationalist reaction arose and threatened to overwhelm it. The prohibitions and impositions of Christendom only pinned down the religion sufficiently to allow local reaction to assail it with unrelenting accuracy. Local converts turned upon their foreign teachers: "It is you who hold us down: it is your insistence upon your Western creeds which has crippled our thought: it is you who will not put us into

positions of authority: it is you who will not trust us with the money which you have taught us is necessary for any religious expansion." (*Ministry of the Spirit*, 180.)

Allen said missionaries believed that they were training their converts for freedom and found they had only exasperated them, and driven them into revolt. The true domination of the foreign missionaries was not so much a lust to keep power in their own hands as an incapacity to see that to nurse converts in the beginning, and to act as their patrons, was to become lords over them, and that to stifle their first unrecognized, unspoken instinct for self-expression was to make certain first of sterility and then of sterile revolt. If Christianity survived that shock it would be by reason of a post-Western cultural euthanasia, by virtue of a radical redrawing of the boundary. Allen had shown why.

Cultural Osmosis

Allen asked the question about what might be wrong with the picture missionaries created of their work, and he suggested that it was the Western cultural captivity of the Gospel. Missionaries assumed that it was their responsibility to set and maintain the Christian standard of morality when in fact that was not their business or in their power. Insofar as the moral life had its seat in the unfettered conscience of the person, missionaries could not go there to maintain it. All they could do was to enforce external law, such as colonial administrators enforced, but that was not the remit of missions. When missionaries assumed the role of enforcer, they defeated the very purpose of their announced vocation. They became like the Judaizers in the early church, the people against whom Paul railed for being obstacles to the church's mission! Mission as European cultural righteousness contradicted the Gospel as God's irrevocable gift to all people. Apostolic faithfulness, not to say anything of the gospel's vernacular genius, demanded repudiation of mission as the transmission of Western civilization.

Allen drew briefly on the Islamic comparison to describe where and how Western missions went wrong. Islam, he said, had a fixed, established code of morals and ethics. Muslims operated by a deliberate external code, as the Morisco writer referred to in a previous chapter pointed out. Yet Muslims

admitted converts before they had learnt the code or had even advanced in their understanding of it. Muslims did so in the conviction that in time converts would acquire the habits and knowledge requisite to correct belief and to canonical practice. Once converts had attained to such a standard, they acquired a permanent status within Islam, Allen argued.

Christianity, he urged, could not behave like Islam and expect to retain its moral authority. Only disaster lay on that path. Yet, ironically, mission seemed set on that path, which made Christianity appear like Islam but without the intrinsic advantage Islam enjoyed as *Dár al-Islám*, as worldly domain. Earthly dominion succeeded in projecting Islam's power and ideals, as was the case in Moghul India, but it ruined the church's reputation, as was the case in New Spain. The Kingdom of God in Christianity could not share a common fence with the Kingdom of Mammon without cross-contamination in which God became the covenant of national glory, and Mammon the norm of cultural righteousness. What tempted missions into invoking the wraith of Islam, Allen warned, could not be the spirit of the Christ of apostolic teaching. Missions had to all intents and purposes slipped from that apostolic benchmark, Allen charged. It was safe to assume that those converts who, upon entering the church, received a new moral law by virtue of external imposition would sooner or later recognize no moral necessity for it or take personal responsibility for it. Missionaries could not ask converts to place their social relations on the chopping block in exchange for Christianity as a mere token in their idiom and expect lasting results. It would be like letting missions stew in their own juice.

The Failure of Success

Allen noted that the civilization mandate saddled missions with a distracting message and a crushing burden. The distraction was by way of split of priorities as missionaries spoke variously of the gospel of enlightenment, the gospel of healing, the social gospel, and the gospel of sex equality. Missions stretched their resources to cover medical, educational, and social work as forms of preaching the Gospel. Social uplift became the goal and nature of the gospel itself. The work of Christ was interpreted as lifting

people out of poverty and backwardness. Accordingly, "missionary work was preparing for the day when races and tribes and peoples instructed in Christian ethics, strengthened by Christian science, enriched by Christian sociology, would recognize the source of all this blessing, and would be able to worship and serve Christ duly as Christians ought to do." (Allen, *Spontaneous Expansion,* 1927, 110.) Yet, insisted Allen, Paul deliberately rejected any means of propagating the faith that might distract people in any way from the truth that the Christian faith was founded not in a human philosophy but in the power of God. Salvation was not by cultural osmosis.

The crushing burden on missions was because of the shifting social contours they riveted on their high calling. Large institutions, guilds, clubs, halls and structures were created and staffed with an army of expensive recruits. Heavy machinery was purchased, transported, and maintained at great cost by skilled expatriate specialists who were parachuted into remote areas which had scarcely the means to inherit or to perpetuate such top-heavy elaborate infrastructure. Missions were consumed in the creation of offices and departments, with directors, clerks, accountants, divided and sub-divided. Organization was an end in itself by overshadowing the end for which it existed. Samuel Butler painted a disturbing picture of the power of machines over people when he showed people destroying their machines because they were afraid that they might become their slaves, tending and feeding them for their lives. "May not man himself become a sort of parasite upon the machines; an affectionate, machine-tickling aphid? The servant glides by imperceptible approaches into a master; and we have come to such a pass that, even now, man must suffer terribly on ceasing to benefit the machines." (Cited in Allen, *Spontaneous Expansion,* 1927, 134-135.)

Missionaries' love of organization led them to repose complete trust in organization and to expect spiritual results from it. The effectiveness and continuity of missionary work depended on the strength and continuity of organization. Organization was the vehicle for globalizing Christian mission, and missionaries looked to it to produce ends it was ill-designed for. The organization network created its own momentum and rationale. The large output of tracts and leaflets designed for missionary

intercession, with their emphasis on appeals for gifts of money, might lead an unsuspecting observer to conclude that the authors of these leaflets and tracts had discovered, not the power of intercession, but a silver mine. Technical gear for fund-raising was mounted to facilitate appeals for money, and that became a cause in its own right. It fostered an environment of unhealthy competition. English missionary bishops, for example, urged the Church of England not to allow itself to be outmatched in funds and numbers by American Presbyterians and Wesleyans. The day would come when the West would continue to hold the purse strings of the church but when Christianity would cease to be the monopoly of the West. Allen foresaw that time to be one of no small strife. That is part of the culture clash that has now erupted between a post-Christian West and a post-Western Christianity. Can the wealth of the churches in the West purchase the agreement or acquiescence of Third World Christian leaders in the West's radical social agenda?

Bequeathing the heavy baggage of a professional institutional missionary organization into local hands seemed an impossible and a foolhardy proposition. In the meantime, the machinery of mission appeared as a formidable obstacle to conversion on the ground. It was the first and last barrier local people must cross to make it into the church. Yet the fact that many crossed it without seeing the need at the same time of joining the church stripped civilization of its religious mystique and challenged converts to drop the Christian requirement, in other words to rebel. Civilization just kept compounding the problem of missions, which explains Roland Allen's impassioned and urgent plea for separating the two.

Allen attacked the deleterious consequences of Western materialism and its drag on missionary impetus. With words he placed in the mouth of an imaginary Muslim interlocutor, he articulated those sentiments, of which a paraphrase might be as follows. The Muslim muses to himself about Christian missionaries who pour out their money and who establish all this extravagant machinery. In spite of it all they make only a few converts. Their work will do Muslims more good than harm. They know not the power of a true religion. Whilst the missionaries labor at these material things, Muslims advance by their own spiritual power. Missionaries organize and build,

they toil and sweat to convert by material methods; Islam grows with much less toil and sweat. With all their money and their talents missionaries purchase a few converts only, and then they must begin all over again in the same costly way to make a few more. One convert to Islam is the sure first fruits of a great harvest. Islam advances automatically. God works without material aid by outsiders (Allen, *Spontaneous Expansion*, 1927, 142). Allen's picture, it has to be observed, was created for effect. The picture might succeed in rallying the troops to whom it was directed, but it scarcely reflects the complex character of the mission of Islam. Allen took a certain editorial liberty with his account, justifiably, perhaps, in light of the object he had in view.

The material question was not whether separating civilization and Christianity should be undertaken, but whether an alternative boundary was at all conceivable for Christianity in its post-Western phase. Was Christianity conceivable without Western civilization or without globalization, which is the same thing? The cumulative weight of practice and the distractions of the call to social action were against the idea. Post-Western Christianity in numerous subtle and obvious ways carries the purebred genes of its European origins. Yet the cost of persisting with mission on that basis was too high to be sustainable in the long-term. The impasse shows the inevitable fate of missions as Western civilization, and it suggests that however well endowed, missions could not be salvaged in their foreign character but only in their vernacular roots as locally-led churches. Allen hinted at that shift as a question of methods, and thus failed to lift it up as a matter fundamentally of vernacular appropriation. But it seems the only way to slip the civilizational trap he identified and to establish local priority for Christianity.

Technically, Allen was correct in his diagnosis of the problem. Missions subordinated Christ to the social preconditions they set for the Gospel, conditions that favored stationary centers built under European direction. Those conditions became the preoccupation of missions; they crowded out the gospel. The logic of requiring intellectual, moral, and social advance before faith in Christ, Allen confessed, assumed that intellectual enlightenment and moral and social advance were based on a foundation other than trust in Christ. When missionaries assumed

that enlightenment and improvement would issue in acceptance of faith in Christ, they made it reasonable to conclude that faith in Christ was not the foundation but the coping stone of social and moral progress. They put the cart before the horse. Other well-intentioned people had also made that strategic mistake.

The procedure was flawed from the start. Enlightened and socially advanced local groups could and did cling to their newly acquired cultural status without feeling the least need or inclination to pay any regard to Christianity except to demand that cultural advantage should be firmly disentangled from the need to profess the Christian faith. Of a piece with that is the fact that enlightened and socially advanced ideas could be and were used to deleterious ends, which left Christians having to fight, or at the least to disown, the very thing their own agency created. Nothing demonstrated the futility of Christian teaching better than the indifference or hostility of the class of cultured despisers it raised. The fact that missionaries were blind to that shows how complete was their own cultural captivity. Complacency is a more deadly foe of the gospel than persecution.

Allen recalled that Roman slaves who lived in social conditions deeply repugnant to what the West called the Christian life still converted to Christianity before any ameliorative social remedies were available to them. The Christian life embraced slaves and concubines without bashfulness or reservation while they were slaves and concubines because the Christian life did not make social disadvantage a disqualification of membership. We saw that fact clearly demonstrated among New World slaves and other social victims during the Great Awakening. While the Gospel acted to dissolve social stigma and to empower the cause of equality and justice, the offer of salvation was not made conditional on that. The tail did not wag the dog there.

Redrawing the Boundary

Roland Allen asked for critical honesty from his missionary colleagues. When they spoke of 'Christian civilization,' they had in mind frankly the civilization of Christian England, Western civilization. Allen objected that this was not Christian civilization. To a life devoid of Christian faith missionaries more willingly gave the name of Christian than to a life devoted to

Christ and inspired by Christ under conditions the missionaries regarded as uncivilized. Allen protested the notion of the church as cultural establishment, declaring: "Ignorant men speak as if Christ and His Church had nothing to offer which is not the natural inheritance of every Englishman, nor any right to lay down rules and conditions on which those gifts may be obtained; because they see every man, whatever his belief or his character, admitted without question to the highest privileges which the Church can bestow." (*Ministry of the Spirit*, 194.)

It was mistaken to believe that it was possible to introduce Christian social conditions apart from the Christian faith, Allen pointed out. Educational work, medical work, agricultural work, and social work have been called Christian work only because Christians happened to do them. But they are work that non-Christians have done too, and often with distinction. Not to see that was to be blinded by the force of the ideological gospel. Allen quoted a writer from Japan who noted that Japan had to all intents and purposes adopted the accoutrements of modern civilization without any sign that it paid, or needed to pay, any heed to Christianity. Japan did not confound civilization with Christianity, it was clear, and so why did missionaries?

When he turned from missionaries to local populations, Allen expressed serious doubts about the value of the work of civilization missionaries put their hands to. Organization, for example, looked very different from the ground. The erection of buildings, the management of property, and the maintenance of a vast corps of professional preachers, were all made necessary by missions' civilizational mandate, but were absurd in frontier cultures. You did not want an elaborate system of structures and institutions to propagate faith and values. You needed faith and values. Monetary rewards subverted the religious motive. Naturally, missionaries seemed like cultural mercenaries. The stationary mission station as the model structure for establishing Christianity in foreign lands was misconceived. It was the diocesan structure transferred root and branch to conditions unlike anything in Europe. In a nominally Christian society, such as Europe, synods, church councils, committees, schools, halls, and bureaucratic organization were what you needed to shepherd a flock largely anonymous and largely occasional in its religious habits. In

the mission field that was historically non-Christian, totally different needs had to be addressed by totally different ideas and practices. Missionaries seemed unequipped for that task.

Such a verdict points firmly to the need for a fresh, radical overhaul of Christianity's characteristic missionary enterprise, and in a 1913 work, *Missionary Methods*, Allen devoted some general thoughts to that issue. The missionary he had in mind did not go out to persuade others that the religion in which they were brought up was a bad one and that the missionary's religion was to be preferred. The question, he said, was not one of cultural innocence, namely, that Eastern nations had religions appropriate to their cultural needs just as the West had a religion equally appropriate for it. Some people objected to mission because they felt non-Western societies were too far behind on the scale of civilization to be able to comprehend Christianity's sophisticated system of ethics and theology. It was wrong to force Christianity on such people before they were ready for it. In any case, the simple religions of non-Western populations were far more effective for their equally simple needs, and missionaries should not interfere with what God had seen fit to leave in place. Allen rejected that understanding of Christian mission, calling on Paul for support.

Unusual for his time and among his missionary colleagues, Roland Allen was unflinching in his criticism of what he saw as wrong with mission and with the Western cultural captivity of Christianity. Repeatedly he made the point that undertaking mission in colonized societies should be carefully dissociated from colonial ideas of power and the superiority of Western civilization. Allen was writing in an era of high nationalist agitation when notions of Europe's unquestioned mastery over all spheres of life, including missionary societies, was under attack. Allen was, accordingly, unrelenting in his attack on the folly and hazard of Christian missions promoting civilization. He remained a man of his time in speaking almost by reflex of indigenous people as heathen and primitive, but he roiled the complacency of those who felt entitled to rule the heathen and primitive world unchecked and unquestioned. Even though he was a child of his culture, historical circumstances compelled Allen to undertake a searching critique of the European order and its shortcomings in a world of rising and shifting

expectations. His thought moved very much in the currents of Christianity's local promise, though it was a later generation of people who grasped fully the challenge of context for Christian life and thought.

It happened that Roland Allen never had the opportunity to create a plan to carry out his well thought-out ideas and deep convictions in any mission field. He developed his ideas and opinions specifically with China in mind, though the model of mission he put up for emulation was that of the Apostle Paul. And Paul's model of mission, Allen argued, "was not peculiarly St. Paul's. The method in its broad outlines was followed by his disciples, and they were not all men of exceptional genius. [The method] is indeed universal, and outside the Christian Church has been followed by reformers, religious, political, social, in every age and under most diverse conditions." (Allen, *Missionary Methods*, 1912, 5.)

Yet we may point to something else possibly as being more crucial in Paul's missionary approach than the fact that reformers of every stripe copied it, and that was Paul's uncompromising insistence that embracing the Gentiles as full and unqualified members of the fellowship was the *sine qua non* of the church's mission. The church could not be the church without equal access for those previously considered to be ritually impure. It does not require any special exegesis to appreciate how Paul staked his reputation, and even his life, on that. An important implication for missionary practice of the kind Allen criticized is whether the requirements of civilization conflicted with that Pauline standard, at the heart of which is the weighty matter of the completeness of salvation for Gentiles without permanent Mosaic vetting or oversight.

Allen said the Gentile boundary had been a formidable one for the early Christians to breach, but breach it they did. The Mosaic code seemed an insuperable obstacle. Jesus appeared in the world within the Mosaic system and upheld its impeccable authority. He appointed his apostles within the terms of the covenant. Though in one rare case he commended a Gentile for his faith, saying he had "not found so great a faith, no, not in Israel" (Luke 7: 9), he appointed no Gentile to preach the gospel to Gentiles. The thought of preaching Christ without the law was inconceivable. How could the disciples of Jesus, then, go

outside the covenant, outside the Mosaic system, and admit or recognize as servants of Christ those who were not within the covenant? The answer was that the witness of the Holy Spirit to the redemptive work of Jesus made that move necessary and inescapable. To deny that or to undo it was a blatant contravention of practice and principle.

The covenant was accordingly expanded to make room for Gentiles who "desired communion with the apostles. The apostles acknowledged that they had the Spirit. Being led themselves by the Spirit, they put aside all the countless and crushing objections which could be raised, they put aside all the serious disabilities under which these new converts laboured, they recognized the fact and accepted the consequence. God gave the Holy Spirit; they admitted at once that nothing more was needed for salvation, nothing else was needful for communion." (*Ministry of the Spirit*, 57.)

That is the fact that the enforcers of civilization evaded or defied but that Allen demanded they heeded. "For thirty years he pleaded that the Church (overseas) be placed on its own feet, that is, for an indigenous Christianity. This, he held, could not be imposed from outside[,] for an indigenous Church is not simply a Church that is master in its own house, but a Church that had the gift of the Holy Spirit and knew what this gift meant for its own life." (*Ministry of the Spirit*, xvi.)

For more than just personal reasons, I am most delighted that this book is being reprinted, a judicious collection of some of Roland Allen's seminal writings, and that the public will thereby once again be introduced to his ideas. The book is as sparkling today as when it was first published nearly half a century ago. It is in fact hard to believe that Allen first broached these ideas nearly a hundred years ago, for they are so resonant with contemporary meaning. Allen's argument of cultural righteousness as an unacceptable barrier to the Gospel is vindicated by the current post-Western Christian resurgence.

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