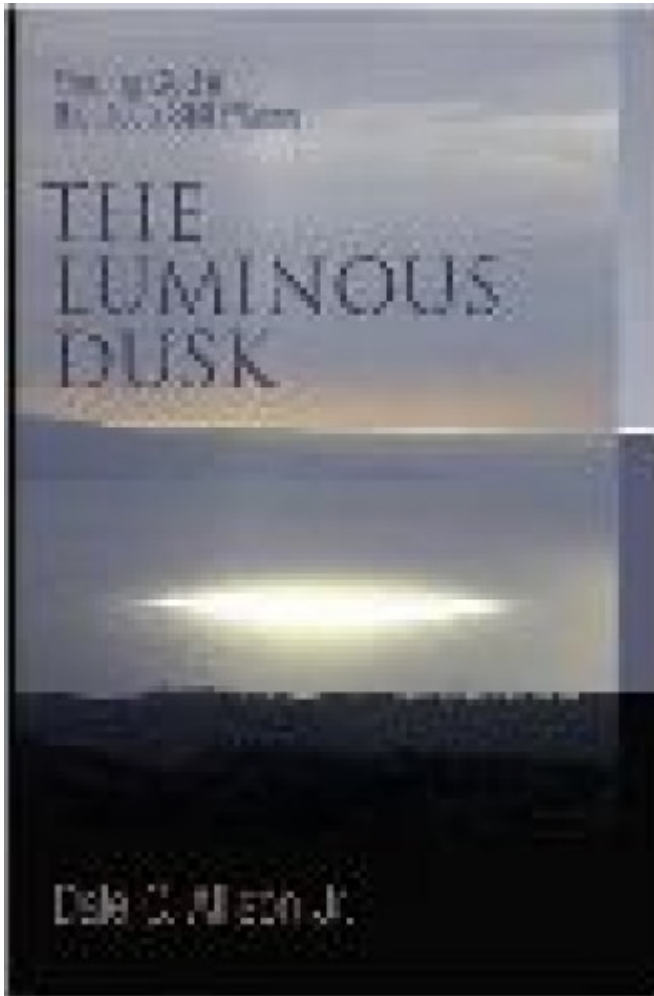


The Luminous Dusk

reviewed by [Arthur Paul Boers](#) in the [February 20, 2007](#) issue

In Review



The Luminous Dusk: Finding God in the Deep, Still Places

Dale C. Allison Jr.
Eerdmans

Dale C. Allison Jr. is out of step with our times and proud of it. This is not entirely surprising, as his academic field as a seminary professor is New Testament and early

Christianity. But he's not stuck in the distant past; he also shows himself to be well acquainted with other classic disciplines, including philosophy and poetry through the ages. He might dispute whether his own location is the issue or whether our time is out of step with the wisdom of the ages.

Allison contends that our era is almost completely cut off from the natural world. Our lives are dominated by artificial lights, for example, and most of us no longer know anything of the night sky. This disconnection has spiritual and theological consequences. Urbanization, secularization, industrialization, technology and the proliferation of artificial environments inevitably if inadvertently drain our lives of wonder and reverence. Consequently, key Christian themes and concepts—indeed, the very scriptures themselves—are unintelligible to many.

Meanwhile, the facts and realities that preoccupy us and dominate our consciousness are worse than useless. In commenting on our fascination with celebrities, for example, Allison writes: "Never before, I must believe, have so many known so much of so little importance." At the same time, our capacity for prayer and receptivity is decreasing. Thus Allison quarrels bitterly with current realities: "The situation, it seems to me, is truly dire."

Allison is clever and witty. He often makes deft allusions to scripture verses that serve as depth charges against the many presuppositions he seeks to subvert and challenge. At times, however, his writing seems posed and even pretentious; he casually uses terms such as *much ballyhooed*, *eschew*, *purveyors of doom*, *inflated ocular appetite*, *the olden world*. A middle-aged father, he is proud of the fact that his children are "anomalies" for being able to "recite Blake, Shelley and Keats." While this is an impressive achievement, I wonder whether Allison's defiant exaltation of things past and his unrelenting criticism of things present undermines the potential of his thesis.

The book's publicity calls it "genre-bending." Gradually one discerns that Allison portrays a rich form of Christian asceticism that values nature, silence, abstinence, detachment, reading, memorization and poetry. In his defense of venerable practices, he not only cites long-standing Christian themes but also makes connections with other religious traditions from around the world and throughout history, including Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shintoism, Judaism, Inca religion and Islam. But the genre-bending qualities of this volume make it hard to know who will read it or how it can be used. Its language is too complex and at times stodgy for

average adult education classes, and the absence of footnotes and bibliography limits its academic usefulness.

Allison paints an unremittingly ugly picture of our culture, with its devastating distractions. I confess that I do not need much convincing. I am the kind of curmudgeon who does not find it necessary to apologize for admiring Luddite instincts. So I resonate with Allison in many respects. Even cranks like me love company.

What Allison fails to do, however, is to help us understand why people settle for thin, depleted, superficial and virtual lives. It is indeed a tragedy that classic spiritual disciplines and practices—all of them rightly lauded by Allison—are displaced by glittering and shallow counterfeits, but we finally need more than just complaints about that being the case. We cannot realistically expect to counter such developments without analyzing what has happened or why.

And we need strategies for living differently. Allison notes that he is averse to “social prescriptions.” He matter-of-factly asserts that technological progress cannot be slowed and that its critics are largely and inevitably ignored. And he is sure that spending more time outdoors will not bring about much change in perception or lifestyle. Is there any way out, any way forward? I believe so. Yet if Allison agrees, he does not tell us what that future might be, except that we should do all the things that many, if not most, people have long since stopped doing.

Allison winsomely describes various practices and priorities: asceticism, prayer, reading, emulation of saints and honoring of virtues. “Darkness and stillness . . . become our collaborators, helping us to drag our attention away from this world of divertissement to the numinous world that holds the neglected fountain of divine light,” he writes. But eloquence alone will not help or move us to recovery, let alone redemption. If all those disciplines could not stand up to technological temptations and diversions before, what hope, counsel and encouragement can he give us that a different way is possible?

To paraphrase another eloquent social curmudgeon, it is all very well to critique our way of life, but the point is to change how we live.