

Vulnerable Mission: An Overview

Timothy V. Reeves

1. Western Christian Sectarianism and the African Indigenous Church

My interest in mission is very much from the perspective of being a member of a supporting church. But I should be frank: I was never really that interested in it. Mission events came round and I did my best to give them all due attention and make a donation. Missionary work was for others, not for me, and as a rule I let them get on with it. My real passion is, and has always been, in a variety of technical subjects; in particular what I refer to as the five Ps: that is, Physics, Programming, Philosophy, Psychology and the Paranormal. So how is it that a person who had to fight a considerable level of innate mission apathy ends up being intensely interested in Vulnerable Mission? That is the story I will now tell.

Let me say from the outset that I regard the Christian Gospel as the nearest thing I've seen to the meaning of life, the universe and everything. But soon after being converted I quickly realised that Western Christianity covered a rich diversity of church cultures; that's a nice way of saying that a broad swathe of the Christian community was an inchoate squabbling mass of partisans; in particular, I'm thinking about Christianity's many separatist and sectarian subcultures, a new species of which creeps out from under every stone one turns. The overall result is a weird zoo of practice and belief often pushed with cultish

vehemence. The awkward fact I had to face was that Christianity didn't work as per many a spiritual cliché that do the rounds in Christian communities.

Why a miraculous and beautiful message which addresses deep questions of meaning and purpose should be associated with such dissonance was a huge mystery to me. In order to shed light on this question, I threw myself into the study of Christian sects and cults. To cut a long story short, I eventually formed a model in my mind where I thought of the many different Christian expressions as being a bit like the Roman roads that conveyed the first Gospel messengers; like those

roads, churches are part of a humanly flawed culture and follow different directions, yet paradoxically in God's boundless grace they are conveyances of the Gospel. That Gospel is clearly capable of diffusing across the boundaries of culture and nation; I call it The Open Gospel (see Appendix 1).

As I continued to ponder the difficult issue of the variegated nature of Christian community, I started reviewing Jim Harries' journals out of Africa: Unlike many upbeat missionary reports, Jim's journals revealed a very

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authentic and raw African experience; he was clearly getting very close to Africa's culture and ways. Here was a land that had the phenomenon of the African Indigenous Church, a place where Christianity seemed to be buried under a mass of superstitious elaboration. In fact to call them Christian churches sometimes seemed to stretch the term to breaking point. But in a sense it wasn't qualitatively different to what I had seen in the West in

terms of sectarianism, although with an African cultural overlay. So at first all this seemed to be just a further generalisation of my studies regarding the partisan nature of Christian community. This was my first big connection with Jim's ministry; namely, the observation that Christianity is a messy work in progress wherever you go. In fact at times it's so messy that one wonders if "progress" is the right word!

I have an epistemic rule of thumb (or *heuristic*) and it is this: If you want to get deeper into the truth about our world then investigate the anomalies; that is, one looks at the places where one's observational experiences don't quite fit one's understanding. These are places where one feels a certain amount of intellectual dissonance. It was probably this rule that attracted me to so many of the strange aspects of the rural African experience.

When I started reading Jim's journals I was blown away. They were rich in what I can only term as "high strangeness". A naive view of church might lead one to think that once Africans take on board Christianity, the Holy Spirit breezes in and blows away all those musty old cobwebs of preliterate religion, and perspicuity of communication between Western

and African Christians follows on as a matter of course. Dream on, it just doesn't happen!

Jim's journals and emails were full of examples of African Indigenous Church thinking that were worlds apart from the thinking of those of us in the Western church. Let me give you a couple of examples. Here is a snippet of African church life taken from one of Jim's emails:

Four men plus about eight boys processing round and round inside the church, each singing as loudly as possible, characterised this church. The processing went on for over ½ hour. In discussion afterwards we were told that **it is better to pray and fast outside than in a house, as outside winds bring the power of plants, animals and other things to help the believer in his pursuit of God's truth.** (Jim's email dated 25 April)

As we will see, that reference to the unseen power which the rural African perceives as pervading his living space is very important evidence of a vital difference between African and Western thinking, and so I will be coming back to this observation later.

My second example is a comment I have taken from one of Jim's Journals of December 2008. It attempts to sum up the difference between the Western mechanical scientific paradigm and the preliterate "magical worldview."

In a so-called "magical worldview" a man is more likely to pray for a fish than to think about building a boat to venture out with onto the water. He will concentrate on fulfilling those ritual requirements associated with successful living **while only slightly considering the mechanics of the technology of apprehending fish.** (Jim's Journal, December 2008)

Notice my emphasis here; in fact, when a preliterate society does come into contact with the technology of the West it is inclined to interpret that technology in magical terms – consider for example the cargo-cults.

Digression: But What is Magic?

What we see in these observations from rural Africa are attempts to connect with and perhaps even manipulate the invisible power and principalities that in the magical paradigm permeate the interstices of our world. We could define magic in the following way: The Magical World view majors in channels of influence, means of signalling and receiving information that fall outside the categories of the Western Scientific Mechanical paradigm.

In fact, Western science has a list of entities that it calls particles, and these are mooted to be all but exhaustive of the possible ways influence and information can get from A to B. The table on page 3 collects together the

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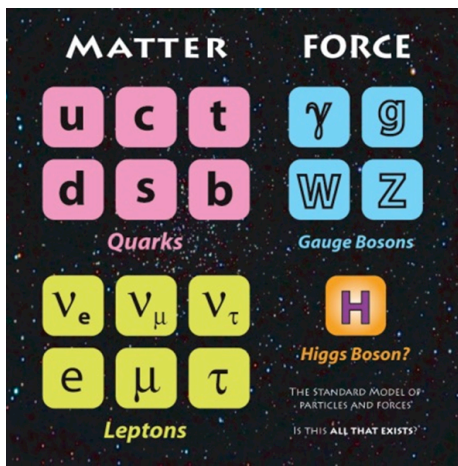
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The Particles of Modern Physics: Is this all that exists?

particles that are thought by some to more or less tie up modern physics, indeed perhaps even reality itself!

All we need to understand here is that this table, in the minds of some, is making claim to being all but exhaustive of how information and influence can get from place to place in our world. There may be one or two other particles to be discovered, but no radical changes in the concepts employed are expected.

Notice the question: “Is this all that exists?” It is a moot point as to just how watertight and comprehensive this table is. But in spite of that, because of confidence, hubris even, in the comprehensiveness of the Western Mechanical paradigm we can turn Jim’s statement round to give the Western view of catching a fish: “In the Western Mechanical world view a man is more likely to concentrate on the mechanics of the technology of apprehending fish, such as building a boat **while only slightly considering prayer for a fish and/or fulfilling those ritual requirements associated with successful living.**”

3. Natural Language and Association Networks

Having made that little digression into physics, I must get back on track and explain how I made my second

connection to Jim’s work in Africa (the first being my Christian sect studies.). For this we must go right back to 1971 when I read Edward De Bono’s well-known book *The Mechanism of Mind* (De Bono, 1969). Once again I must cut a very long story short. If De Bono’s theories of mind were only partially correct, then it suggested a way in which some aspects of human thinking can be simulated on a computer. Home computers weren’t available in 1971, and it wasn’t until the mid-1980s that I started to code my ideas into a computer programming language. The result was a simulated word association network or concept nexus. Let me briefly explain:

Consider, for example, the standard concept association game: I say “paper” and you associate, perhaps, the concept of “writing”, and with “writing” you associate “ink”, with “ink” you associate “liquid” and so on. Now the interesting thing is that this experiment in concept association is not always repeatable: If I say “paper” another time you (or perhaps someone else) may associate the word “book”. From “book” you may associate

effect; yes, the effects will be similar for similar cultures, but not exactly the same. Given that there are going to be different responses even between people of the same culture, it’s clear that the differences are going to be that much greater between people of different cultures. When one considers words and their associative effects, one is really dealing with something that is very, very open ended.

It is this associative effect which is in fact what natural language is all about; Jim calls it “impact” rather than association, but the idea is the same. It is the triggering of these fields of association or impact that give words their meaning. For meaning to be invoked, words must impact a mental environment steeped in a culture. Hence we have this elegant formula that Jim introduced me to:

$$\text{MEANING} = \text{TEXT} + \text{CONTEXT}$$

That is, meaning is the joint product of the interaction of text and context, where context is bound up with culture and the mental associations it has built in to our thinking. When we grasp this

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“story” and from there on to “novel”. And if I repeated the experiment yet again the result would quite likely be different still. This is evidence that single concepts are in fact nodes in an intricate network of association. When words impact us, they act as stimuli activating huge haloes of association. Because there are so many degrees of freedom and variables in this system it is very unlikely that the same word for different observers will have exactly the same associative

formula, we begin to understand that words don’t so much *contain* meaning rather than *triggering meaning*, a meaning which comprises of the cascades of thought words stimulate as they impinge upon our cognitive surfaces.

The trouble is we have been somewhat misled by the superficial similarity between the logical use of language such as we see in propositional logic and the highly open-ended, very flexible and fuzzy nature of *natural*

language. In natural language we are dealing with something very different from propositional logic. Propositional logic is about *notation*, that is, the formal and mechanical manipulation of symbolic tokens, whereas natural language is about *connotation*.

You see, mathematical languages, such as propositional logic, being about the carefully defined manipulation of symbols, implies that *mathematical meaning* is “*objectively out there*”, embodied in these mechanical manipulations. These symbolic operations try to remain independent of the huge complexities and foibles of the human psyche. This means that *notational languages* are highly portable. In contrast, *natural languages* are only semi portable. In natural language the meanings are “*in here*”, in one’s head. This is because the tokens of natural language trigger off, by virtue of CONNOTATION, immense cascades of proprietary thought behind the interface of human-to-human communication. These cascades may have some overlap between individuals, but they are never identical. For human-to-human communication to work, one must assume large shared databases of association, databases that are very culturally specific.

Comparing two different languages from culturally diverse communities is a bit like comparing two jigsaw puzzles. It is entirely inappropriate to attempt a one-to-one map between the pieces of different jigsaws; we simply cannot say that this bit from this jigsaw here maps to this bit from another jigsaw over here, especially if, as seems to be the case, the Western jigsaw is very different to the African jigsaw. If rural Africans start using English, they are not easily going to convey an African picture to us because they are using the wrong jigsaw pieces.

To illustrate how a failure to appreciate the linguistic association game can wreak havoc with communication

here is an example: In chapter 2 of his book *Theory to Practice in Vulnerable Mission* (Harries, 2012), Harries gives us an example of how what appears to be a very innocuous question is actually taboo in many African contexts. You wouldn’t think that there is anything wrong with asking a parent “How are your children?” But in an African context this seemingly innocent inquiry may be regarded as sinister because it may have the *connotation* that you are sizing the children up for bewitchment (2012:34). We are left with the impression that in order to get a handle on African society, learning their language is not optional, and that language can really only be learned if one is familiar with the context in which it is useful.

4. Western Dualism

We now come to the third connection I made with Jim’s fascinating papers and essays out of Africa. It is quite clear that African preliterate thinking, at least in rural Africa, infects their implementation of Christianity. But we in the West have no reason to be smug about this because it is quite likely that our worldview infects our concept of Christianity. In fact, I would venture to say that rural Africa has one thing right about the world that we in the West have got wrong, and this error is *Western Dualism*.

Western dualism is the view that the world has two very sharply distinguished ontological categories which manifest themselves in a set of dichotomies based on a sharp distinction between the *supernatural* and the *natural*. God is thought of as a supernatural agent of causation to be set against natural agents of causation. This dualism paves the way for other related Western dichotomies, namely;

The sacred vs. the secular
The spiritual vs. the material
The heart vs. the mind
Intuition vs. reason

Feeling vs. thinking
Irrationality vs. rationality

It is very difficult for Westerners to think outside these binary categories. Before I started reading Harries, I had had a long personal history of wrestling with these, what I believed to be false dichotomies. And when I started reading Jim’s material, it was clear that Jim was having a fight with similar dichotomies. In fact, let me quote from Ralph Hanger’s introduction to Harries’ book *Communication in Mission and Development*:

Central to Jim’s thesis in this area is the **dualism of the English language** that is based in the western world and the **monism of African society**. He points out that the English based dualism, which sees the spiritual and physical as two separate realms, fails to provide a clear medium for communication with the basically monistic African who sees a spiritual background to every physical event. (Harries, 2013a Introduction)

Western Christians are not only failing to effectively communicate with Rural Africans but there is also a problem with the Western paradigm itself. This problem is dualism. Dualism may be a consequence of the 18th century enlightenment that helped bring to the fore *mechanical means* of achieving results, and this appeared to be in contradistinction to *magical means* of manipulating reality. This in turn has had an impact on the Western view of God, that is, its theology. We in the West are apt to contrast the natural processes of the material world over and against the spirit and supernatural worlds. In dualism we see the physical world as a distinct and quasi-autonomous object that functions like a machine seldom needing supernatural attendance. When Westerners then move into theism or become Christians, this inclines them to take on board some very contrived and unnatural notions of God such as deism, or god-of-the-gaps philoso-

phies where God becomes an auxiliary explanation to be invoked when the so-called natural order fails to explain things.

When one is faced with apparently irreconcilable dichotomies, it's a sure sign that the underlying worldview supporting them has something wrong with it. We sense that our world should be less fragmented, so either we just hold onto a polarised philosophy or something gives. In the West, what gives is theism to be replaced by atheism, thus doing away with one half of a tense dichotomy.

5. Learning from Africa Monism and Pagan Literature

Anyway, let's see if we can learn something from preliterate rural Africa. The illustration below is a diagram

I have taken from a book called *The World's Religions* edited by Sir Norman Anderson (Anderson, 1975). This diagram can be found in a chapter titled "The Religions of Pre-literate Societies" written by Edward G Newing. Newing served as a missionary, minister and theological lecturer in Kenya and Tanzania. His model isn't being proposed as a final truth, but rather as kind of test hypothesis against which we can compare what we hear coming from Africa to see if it joins the data dots. In fact Newing himself implies that his picture is only a very general rule that has exceptions, and can vary slightly from culture to culture. There are, however, a couple of points I would like to make note of in his model.

First, we see that God, or the

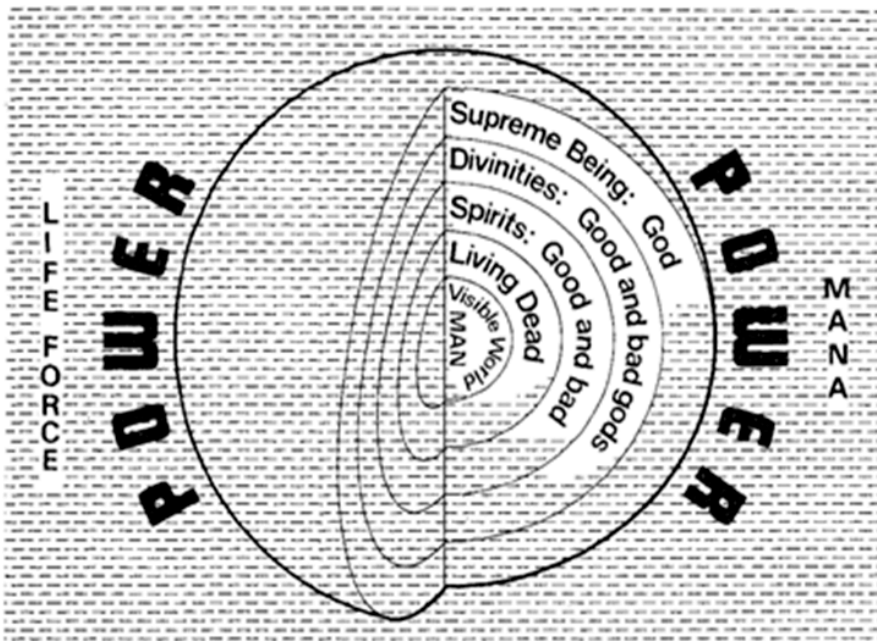
"Supreme Being", is at the top of the hierarchy, a somewhat distant spirit having little to do with the affairs of men. Much more relevant to the preliterate mind are the immediately surrounding spirits, in particular the spirits of the living dead; this is very consistent with the observation that in rural Africa much wealth and time is spent on funerals as an important means of keeping the dead happy.

Secondly, notice what to Western eyes looks like a field in which the whole picture is immersed. Newing labels this field using the Melanesian word *Mana*, a word, which apparently means "power". Of this Newing says:

In all PLSs [Preliterate Societies] a spiritual power or life-force is recognised as permeating the universe of their experience. The Melanesian word "mana" has been adopted by scholars to describe this sacred power. It is never worshiped but it is recognised as the given fact of life. The Nilotic [pertaining to the river Nile] peoples of East Africa and the Sudan term it "**Jok**" which, like "**wakan**" of the Sioux and Manitou of the Aloguin Ameroindians, **is also the name of the Supreme Being**. Among other PLSs God simply possesses power in highly intensive form.

Mana may concentrate itself in certain things such as stones, plants, trees, animals and people with varying degrees of intensity. All success and all advantages proceed from the favourable exercise of the mana. A man's position in the community depends on the amount of mana he possesses. Its manipulation is the main function of the religious experts. Charms, medicines, rite etc. contain this power for the benefit of the wearer or user. ...it can be highly dangerous and therefore PLSs protect themselves against its abuse by a system of taboos.

According to the foregoing quote—see my highlight—there does seem to be an association of this field of power (or "Jok" as it is referred to in East Africa) with the Supreme Being, but I'll come back to that in a little while. In the meantime let us note that PLSs are anxious to do what they can to manipulate and harness this power via magic. I think that the foregoing quote takes us back to the observation



2. The seen world

Man lives in community in a world in which he feels at home and into whose rhythm he fits. But it is also a world which brings terror and fear. In order that he may continually enjoy the good – long life, many children, much food and wealth, great respect – and ward off evil – sickness, barren wives, locust plagues, disrespect from the young, witchcraft – man must know the secrets of power or be able to consult those who have special skill in its manipulation for good or evil.

I started with from one of Jim's emails; that is:

Four men plus about eight boys processing round and round inside the church, each singing as loudly as possible, characterised this church. The processing went on for over ½ hour. In discussion afterwards we were told that it is better to pray and fast outside than in a house, as outside winds bring the power of plants, animals and other things to help the believer in his pursuit of God's truth. (Jim's email dated 25 April)

What we have here, it seems, is an example of an attempt to manipulate the power of Jok in order to bring blessing. Jim tells me that this word Jok tends to be translated to English as witchcraft, a word with English connotations that may not do justice to the rural African understanding of Jok.

So, we have here two ideas, Jok and the Supreme Being. While at first sight they seem to be two different conceptual objects, we find, in fact, if we dig a little deeper, that these two objects are closely related by association. We start to see this

I have already mentioned that this very term Jok was used by the Acholi people (a Luo tribe in Uganda) to translate 'God'. The Shilluk people consider Juok to be spirit, God and body in one. Ogot has found jok to be the Luo equivalent of Placide Tempels' vital force, which Tempels found through his research, forms the basis for African philosophy among the Luba people of the Congo. Tempels explains of the African (bantú-luba) people that this vital force "dominates and orientates all their behavior." The "Bantu speak, act, live as if, for them, beings were forces," explains Tempels. Because everything, including the animal, vegetable and mineral has 'forces', the whole of African life is sacred - there is nowhere that juok (vital force) is not found.

If that quote hasn't already linked God and Jok, then have a look at this quote from the same book:

Considering the above (and the many other uses of the term Nyasaye in Luoland) forces me to conclude that Nyasaye is in many ways accurately translated as the 'vital force' of Tempels; Nyasaye is valued according to his (her/its) manifest and immediate power.

And here is the crucial point: It is this word Nyasaye that is used in African Bibles to translate the term "God",

that readily link to the concept of the Supreme Being.)

Immanent: Associations: indwelling, immersive, inherent, omnipresence (Ideas that readily link to the concept of the immersive power of "Jok".)

If I may anticipate by using the language of Trinitarian theology, then the preliterate picture of God I'm getting is of an entity associated with two concepts, if not two persons; namely, the eminent Supreme Being who is at the same time immanent in the sense that something of His being pervades our space as power. It is very significant that St Paul, when he visited the Athenian Mars hill in the pagan context of the Areopagus, he set the scene by a respectful appeal to a common ground theology (Acts 17:26-28):

26 From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. 27 God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is

When it comes to the enigma of the divine, I believe that pagan and preliterate societies have an important part of the puzzle; this part is the preliterate and pagan appreciation of God as an immanent being, always present and deeply involved with the everyday affairs of life.

is in the quote I have already given from Newing, where he writes: "The Nilotic [pertaining to the river Nile] peoples of East Africa and the Sudan term it "Jok" which, like "wakan" of the Sioux and Manitou of the Aloguin Ameroindians, is also the name of the Supreme Being."

If we now turn to Harries' 2012 book *Theory to Practice in Vulnerable Mission* we find further evidence of a close association between the immersive power of Jok and the Supreme Being:

bringing God, the Supreme Being, into close association with Jok, the power in which our world is immersed.

God is Both Eminent and Immanent

As a result of this quick study of preliterate religion I would like to draw your attention to two similar sounding words that we can find in our English dictionaries, namely the words Eminent and Immanent. These words have the following associations:

Eminent: Associations: rising above, separate, high, aloof (Ideas

not far from any one of us. 28 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring'.

Verse 28 here contains two quotes taken from Greek literature, and these are shown in bold. The first quote is a saying put into the mouth of the semi-mythical Epimenides of Crete who legend said erected anonymous altars around Athens (a legend which Paul also alludes to in his address at the Areopagus – see Acts 17:23). The second is taken from poetic verse by the Stoic philosopher Aratus. St. Paul connects with his knowledgeable Greek audi-

ence by allusions to pagan literature and by endorsing common-ground notions of God. But in doing this, he balances the metaphor of God as an eminent masculine deity imposing his will on nature from above against a more feminine nurturing metaphor of God as the womb-like environment in which we are immersed, an environment which sustains our very existence and from which we are the offspring. This is the immanent God as opposed to the eminent God. Paul, like C S Lewis, respected at least some aspects of pagan theology. That is something we need to take note of.

When it comes to the enigma of the divine, I believe that pagan and preliterate societies have an important part of the puzzle; this part is the pre-literate and pagan appreciation of God as an immanent being, always present and deeply involved with the everyday affairs of life. As a consequence, dualism doesn't arise in Africa.

But in spite of the endorsement of St Paul there is an important part of the puzzle missing in preliterate and pagan thinking.

Deficiencies in African Monism

African names for God carry with them the connotation of an ambient impersonal vital force or spirit permeating the cosmic background. This can have the effect of depersonalising God's nature. He is thought of as vital force open to manipulation by those who know the appropriate rituals and spells. It also, as Jim Harries maintains in his writings, encourages a prosperity teaching approach to God. In fact, in the context of prosperity the African understanding of the Divine may lose all sense of personality. The following quote has been taken from Harries' article African Pentecostalism in Inter-cultural Linguistic Context. Here we find that the name for God, Nyasaye,

has almost lost all connection with divine personality:

Ugandan Luo people had no name for God and no monotheistic belief, according to Okot. This to me confirms the likelihood that the Kenyan Luo (who are closely related to the Uganda Luo) used (use?) the term Nyasaye more as a description of something that they note is happening, than a label for an assumed divine presence. The term used to translate the English term God then would have been used to describe the fruitfulness that arises from pleading (with spiritual forces).

I think the links in my argument should be becoming clear. The original Luo equivalent understanding to God was the fruitfulness that comes through pleading. This (Nyasaye) being used as the translation for God results in Luo people assuming that God's character is as Nyasaye, and that he is the one to whom British people plead in order to acquire their prosperity. The problems I have mentioned above associated with the dominance of theological debate being in English, means that formal (or semi-formal) debate never challenges such foundationally non-Christian (and especially non-Western) formulations. The same understanding of God continues as a result largely unabated. This means in turn that believers come to see Nyasaye (God) as source of prosperity in a way never envisaged by the dominant English-speaking theological fraternity. (Harries, 2013b)

Here Nyasaye, or God, if that's the right name, has become the immanent power you manipulate by pleading in order to gain; and remember it is this word Nyasaye which is used for God in African Bibles. Does this help explain an African predilection for prosperity teaching?

These subtleties with just what the African rural mind-set associates with the term "God" are likely to stay unappreciated by missionaries who interact with Africans using only English. As an aside, let me just say that the idea of the Divine nature having an impersonal aspect has not entirely left us in the West. It is interesting to note that the Jehovah's Witnesses think of the Holy Spirit as the impersonal power of God and insentient. Also, one can sometimes hear Western Christians refer to the Holy Spirit using the

impersonal pronoun "it".

However, thanks to Christianity, the Western mind-set does have a strong view of God's personal nature and this is something we may feel that Rural Africa needs to grasp. Just as Africa holds a part of the puzzle that the West misses, so Africa misses an important part of the puzzle that the West possesses.

Contrasting the West with Preliterate and/or Rural Africa: Thesis and Anti-Thesis

So let me summarise the situation so far:

Africa:

The upside: The idea of being immersed in the supernatural leads to a unified and holistic worldview and perhaps even the idea of an immanent God.

The downside: The divine (if indeed that's the right term to use) becomes a quasi-impersonal power to be manipulated by magic in order to enhance prosperity.

The West:

The upside: The legacy of Christianity: God is a personal power deeply interested in our affairs.

The downside: Dualism. An eminent God is set over and against the natural world, a world that works by quasi-autonomous mechanical processes occasionally punctuated by the "supernatural" (if you are a Christian, but if you are an atheist you dispense with the latter).

The difference between the two paradigms here is vast, and if Harries is right then linguistic differences and wealth disparity shields the gulf of misunderstanding that separates the West from Africa. We need to bring together the two upsides here. God's immanence and eminence must be

held in right balance. God the Father is eminent beyond our reach, and the Holy Spirit immanent but so easily misinterpreted as an impersonal power that we try to manipulate.

As we have seen, the Rural African doesn't believe the mechanical aspects of our world to be nearly so crucial as getting right with the sacred power (or *Jok*) which surrounds him and immerses his world. Conversely, the Westerner involved in a project focuses on the mechanical aspects of his work; he is less inclined to ask if he has got right with *Jok* but rather asks Does it work?

sion and magic (African people are first class persuaders and intercessors!).

2. Christian reaction: Recognition and dependence on a God who is both immanent and eminent and who is also highly personal and loving.

3. Post-Christian reaction: Re-signed acceptance of life's capriciousness: As an attempt to reconnect with the spiritual and mystical this may usher in "The Green Man" syndrome, a kind of personification of the otherwise insentient and incomprehensible disorder in the patterns of life.

In our Christian context, I hardly need say that the express revelation of

earth,

¹¹and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:5-11)

Here, I have highlighted the bits where we see evidence that Christ has taken on the mantle of vulnerability.

What we have in the incarnation is God coming, not with the overwhelming fire power of omnipotence, but instead a God who has stripped himself of those aspects of His nature that could just possibly distort our relationship with him, and give us other reasons than love to be attracted to Him. There is a strong case, I believe,

What we have in the incarnation is God coming, not with the overwhelming fire power of omnipotence, but instead a God who has stripped himself of those aspects of His nature that could just possibly distort our relationship with him, and give us other reasons than love to be attracted to Him.

Synthesis: Christ and Vulnerable Mission

Today, even science itself suggests that there is something wrong with dualism. We are beginning to understand from Western science that it is humanly impossible to take full control of our world, because our scientific mechanical descriptions have an inherent incompleteness. As it turns out, the laws of physics only really amount to a kind of probabilistic performance envelope rather than tight mechanical rules strictly obeyed. In fact, if we think of the universe as a machine, then there is an awful amount of slack in it; so much so, in fact, that the random, the unexpected, and the highly unpredictable will always be with us. Three possible human reactions to the inevitability of techno-scientific incompleteness are as follows.

1. Preliterate reaction: Attempt to negotiate with the immanent numinous forces of nature through ritual persua-

God's personality is the Second Person of the Trinity, Jesus of Nazareth. In Christ and the incarnation we find that God chose to relate to man initially with what to all intents and purposes looks just like a Vulnerable Mission: In some ways the following well known Biblical passage is the prototype and model for Vulnerable Mission:

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

⁶Who, being in very nature[a] God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

⁷rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature[b] of a servant, being made in human likeness.

⁸And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself

by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

⁹Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,

¹⁰that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the

for the argument about the epistemic distance of God; that is, if the power and glory of God's presence were overwhelmingly manifest to us, then it would compromise the authenticity of our response to him.

A benefactor, like say a king, finds out if his beneficiaries really love him if he approaches them stripped of any power and glory that may encourage self-centred ulterior motives and what I call the "Benefactor-beneficiary effect". The relationship between a very rich benefactor and very poor beneficiary is highly asymmetrical, and encourages less than frank interactions and exchanges. In particular, the beneficiary will mind his ps and qs and may well be tempted to alter his behaviour in a way that in some cases could be construed as manipulative. The consequence is that the asymmetry between benefactor and beneficiary may have a detrimental effect on the authenticity of their relationship.

And so it is with Vulnerable Mission. When a cross-cultural mission partner (or even a secular development partner for that matter) comes with overwhelming fire power in terms of resources, wealth and cultural influence, relationships with third-world partners become distorted. Consequences are dependency economics and the wild card of the “hidden sector” that troubles the counsels of Western partners with incomprehensible and anomalous results. All this is obscured by the opaqueness of local languages. It will help us to get on an equitable footing with our rural African partners if we come clean and admit that the intrinsic incompleteness of our science means that we too, like them, depend on an immanent providence.

In many ways I have to say that knowledge of Vulnerable Mission has spoiled my lazy African donor experience. Whenever I see an appeal for support for a Western Agency working in the third world I now just can't stop myself attempting to read the subtext by wondering if this agency is factoring in all that stuff about covert preliterate religion, botched communication, and addiction to Western funding etc. I'll never look at mission with the same eyes again. However, the overall picture, although very challenging, is nevertheless exciting. New things are being uncovered.

There is however, one caveat here: I don't think that Vulnerable Mission is an easy open and shut case; it has many challenging questions, and dilemmas, some of which I have included in Appendix 2 of this paper.

Appendix 1: The Open Gospel

In March of 2000 I endeavoured to produce a pithy statement that summarised my view of the kernel of Christianity. Rather than annunciate

an exclusive and purist formula defining some Christian sub-grouping, I was anxious to forge an inclusive statement giving account of the hostile demeanour often adopted by Christian sub-cultures toward one another. I came up with the following statement. It is a bit formal and legal sounding, perhaps because I wanted to make it as bullet proof as possible.

The “Open Gospel” is a term I use to indicate that the common, defining, distinctive, and primary phenomenon of Christianity is not its patchwork of sometimes mutually hostile church subcultures but the underlying Gospel message, a message which, unbounded by cultural barriers, diffuses *laissez-faire* style through populations spawning a variety of church communities. These communities, which may or may not be independent of one another, display varying degrees of development, spiritual health and quality of culture. The net result is that no one group or subculture (Thank God) can claim to have privileged access to the Gospel message, or to have sole agency in its propagation, or to be the only group expressing the spiritual life and gifting that it gives. Inevitably, some Christian communities will vociferously claim that they are either the best and most faithful representatives of the Gospel, or perhaps its only representatives. Self-praise is, of course, no recommendation, and anyway such claims are little more than bluster because they are impossible to enforce: It is now five hundred years since the Roman Catholic church started to lose the power to enforce its claim to being the sole distributor and representative of the Gospel. But even at the height of Roman Catholic political power it would seem almost impossible to attain complete control of a message that can pass quietly from mind to mind. Thus, it is exceedingly difficult to enforce monopoly claims upon the

Gospel, even under conditions favouring such claims. Clearly the Good News is out, and groups who maintain they have exclusive rights to it can simply be ignored by other groups who have taken it to heart and made it their own, in all its fullness. Some Christian sub communities will undoubtedly retain their mutual prejudices toward one another and express a partiality as to who can or cannot claim to possess the fullness of Gospel truth, anointing and gifting. But The Word is like a seed borne on the Wind of the Spirit; who can control either? What God gives no man can take away. (I John 2: 20 & 27)

The idea of the Open Gospel is, for me at least, a source of great consolation as it helps reduce the significance of the contentions surrounding parochial religious elaborations of particular cultural realisations of Christianity. Those elaborations are sometimes beautiful and fascinating, sometimes helpful, sometimes essential, sometimes relevant, sometimes indifferent, sometimes quaint, sometimes outdated, sometimes comical, sometimes bizarre, sometimes tasteless, sometimes tacky, and, unfortunately, sometimes malign. Whether we are talking of the decorative trappings of ritual and vestment, or obsessions with mystical gnosis, or strict adherence to fancied biblical ordinances, or formulaic interpretations which use the Bible to contrive rigid blueprints for arranging life and church, we have here behavioural forms which, whilst they may not be absolutely wrong, are often championed by those who protect them with a jealous religious zeal. Thus, Christians who live beyond the religious subcultures defined by these behavioural forms may find themselves being bullied by sectarian Christian zealots who will accuse them of being disobedient to the Divine order. These

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Vulnerable Mission is worth a Second Look

Jean Johnson

There is a common belief that missionaries or mission organizations from the West have a personal material and economic advantage and that they should use that advantage to its utmost around the world. This mindset is in sharp contrast to the apostolic age and has yielded serious consequences which often render the Great Commission effort counterproductive. The purpose of this paper is to invite mission practitioners to revitalize the vulnerable positioning modeled by the apostles in order to minimize hindrances to the Great Commission and enhance local productivity.

I could see that we were in big trouble. The Cambodian pastor and I had teamed up to motivate and train church planters from his church. The very first session, we made the following request: “Please share your experience in coming to faith in Jesus Christ.” The first man shared how a Christian organization

its way.

Throughout the world and even more so in the West, there is a common belief that missionaries, mission organizations, and churches from the West have a personal material and economic advantage, and that they should use that advantage to its utmost around the

The more generous we are, the thinking goes, the more resources we will give; the faster we make resources available to others, the faster the church of Jesus Christ will grow worldwide. However, this formula did not work for me.

gave out free glasses, and this was the trigger to his belief in Jesus. Another man talked about how his family received rice, and yet another how he received a piece of land. The same type of testimonies continued. All I could think was, *We are in trouble*. I kept my concerns to myself. About a month later, sitting in a circle on the same woven mat, the church planters began to ask for glasses, rice, and land so they had perks to share with their neighbors, as they shared the good news. In this case, a cycle of dependency was well on

world, especially to help the poor and advance the fulfillment of the Great Commission. Mathematically and in terms of generosity, this seems true. The more generous we are, the thinking goes, the more resources we will give; the faster we make resources available to others, the faster the church of Jesus Christ will grow worldwide. However, this formula did not work for me.

In my early days as a missionary in Cambodia, I went right to work as a pioneer missionary with the aim to make the first handful of disciples—

and do this in such a way that those local disciples would perpetuate the disciple-making commission in their own context and among unreached people groups in their Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria.

Unfortunately, I conceptualized and organized “church” in Cambodia based on some of the resources I had the ability to obtain from my homeland and make available for work in Cambodia. I reasoned, If I am generous and “pay the bills” now, inevitably the impoverished Cambodians will catch the vision and assume full responsibility through their own cultivated generosity and maturity in Christ. This “inevitable” self-giving and self-responsibility was more rare than common. In actuality, my method of subsidizing the discipleship-making process and church movement in someone else’s country actually stifled that very process of maturity and independence for the local people. I certainly tried to make up the gap by teaching on giving, generosity, and stewardship, but the dependent mentality was deeply ingrained. In the gap of economic disparity, my means became the enemy of empowerment and actually impeded the Great Commission effort—the *spontaneous* multiplication of disciples of Jesus Christ.

Roland Allen, a former English missionary who promoted mission strategy for indigenous churches in the early 20th century, summarized my predicament in the 21st:

We must remember that the vast majority of our converts have been, and are being, educated in dependence, and that the vast majority of our missionaries have not advanced even to the point of believing in the desirability of spontaneous expansion from the very beginning. Even those who believe in its desirability are commonly under the impression that they are labouring with all their might to stimulate it, whilst they are practising those very things which hinder it.¹

A variety of Western mission agencies are presently teaching and motivating existing believers around the world to take their place in the Great

Commission by becoming responsible stewards and generous givers—hoping that somehow all the generosity around the world will combine and equal a “reached” and nonimpoverished world. In some ways, I am a part of that task force. But I am convinced that we need to avoid unhealthy dependency at the foundational level—the beginning—by ensuring our practices do not hinder spontaneous expansion in the long run.

Our methods are informed by the twin thoughts that “poverty is so profound around the world” and “we are blessed to be a blessing,” but many of those methods choke the ability of the local church to multiply in its own context, much less go full cycle and become missionaries to another people group. But why do methods driven by the desire to be a blessing to the poor cause certain methods to be amiss? In my case, other people’s material lack and my American abundance caused me to approach missions work as a heroine: “I am here to make a difference and to make up the difference.” But each time

response was that they would go to already Christianized tribal groups because they could get fast results, and that they would leave resistant groups to Westerners who had a lot of money to burn.² (*italics mine*)

Dependency is not just a welfare condition. It becomes an insidious state of mind that can debilitate generation after generation once it gains a foothold.³

If we were to try to identify the one main thing that stands in our way when it comes to the missionary enterprise . . . it would be this: the overwhelming attitude and complex of superiority with which the vast majority of the Western Church is afflicted, and its twin evil, namely, the complex of inferiority that is so deeply rooted in the Church found in the so-called “Majority World.”⁴

Some have chosen a simple equation: Western missionary dollars + African availability and zeal = missionary enterprise . . . This model is simplistic. It attempts to address the problem, but in the process it has the potential of killing the very same African initiative it purports to bring about. For us, it is of the utmost importance that this enterprise be truly indigenous.⁵

Mission strategies that are heavily loaded with material economic abundance may actually defeat the goal of spontaneous multiplication. How many people make disciples or reproduce the

of vulnerable mission. Realizing the fact that there were times my *modus operandi* disempowered local people in the long term, the following statement by Jonathan Bonk forever haunts me:

Material and economic abundance has been a hallmark of the *modus operandi* of Western missionaries throughout the past two centuries. In sharp contrast to their apostolic counterparts of the first century, portrayed by St. Paul as being “on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena” (1 Cor. 4:9), missionaries from Europe and the Americas have — with some notable exceptions — manifested escalating levels of economic and material entitlement beyond the dreams of a majority of the world’s population.⁶

No one can deny the fact that the use of material and economic abundance is an integral part of Western missions. Yet, we are hard-pressed to find apostolic examples in which heaps of money was the key to strategy or success. In actuality, Jesus, the disciples, and Paul left money out of the picture for the most part, and their vulnerable positioning in missions is worth a second look. I suggest that vulnerable positioning relates to at least the following: attitude, methods, reasoning, and communication.

Vulnerable Attitude

And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power. (1 Corinthians 2:2–5, NIV)

I am all for combining word and deed, but Western missionaries (and that includes me) may have unconscious ulterior motives for relying on compassion projects that are often elaborate and make outsiders indispensable to the process. We believe that if we are needed by needy people, we will have

Mission strategies that are heavily loaded with material economic abundance may actually defeat the goal of spontaneous multiplication.

I imposed a “church life” beyond the local people’s ability (using all the goodies we need to “do church” in America) and made up the difference, I created a dependency mentality—ingrained thoughts developed among those with whom I worked:

“Our ways are inferior and will never equate to yours.”

“This is how it works; the mission pays for what they started.”

This mission-imparted mentality does not go away overnight:

I was rather shocked when discussing with a Thai leader the need to bring the Gospel to a large minority group in the country. His

church if they lack initiative, consider the work your problem, are locked in a debilitating mindset of inferiority, and are participating in a church that lacks an indigenous nature? The hindrances to an expert, money-driven mission paradigm are numerous: superficial conversions, the spread of a prosperity gospel, nonreproducible patterns, Westernization of the gospel, syncretism, and more. My goal in this paper is not to elaborate on each consequence, but rather to invite those who do missions to consider alternative paradigms—more, specifically to consider the Great Commission task through the eyes

an easy audience for the gospel. In this case, we become patrons to the people by providing an educational, economical, and physical help. In turn, the recipients of our help become loyal to us, which includes becoming Christians in one form or another.

Not only is this contrary to Paul's declaration in 1 Corinthians 1:2–5, it puts the local people, influenced by our mission work, in a position to have to become patrons of others as they perpetuate making disciples. Thus, they need a lot of money to imitate our impressive and persuasive deed projects.

It is my belief that Westerners need to take a second look at what it means to come in weakness with great fear and trembling so that other's faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.

Vulnerable Resources

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means "queen of the Ethiopians"). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it." Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:

"He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth."

The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?" And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the

eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. (Acts 8:26–39, NIV)

The Ethiopian official said, "Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?" Philip could have answered, "Well, first of all you will need more Jewish-Christian catechism, circumcision, and a more recognized formal ceremony." He did not. Philip didn't bog down the "believing and following Christ process" with a complicated system or nonessentials:

St. Paul's method is not in harmony with the modern Western spirit. We modern teachers from the West are by nature and by training persons of restless activity and boundless self-confidence. We are accustomed to assuming an attitude of superiority towards Eastern peoples, and to point to our material progress as the justification of our attitude. We are accustomed by tradition to an elaborate system of church organization, and a peculiar code of morality. We cannot imagine any Christianity worthy of the name existing without the elaborate machinery that we invented. We naturally expect our converts to adopt from us not only essentials but also accidentals.⁷

In Philip's place, we might have said to the Ethiopian official, "You need more Christian catechism, and the ceremony should be more official, with robes and a credentialed, seminary-experienced minister." We can read account after account through the gospels and the book of Acts that reveal the messengers didn't bog down Christ-experiences by introducing elaborate machinery and the resources to maintain it.

It is my belief that Westerners need to take a second look at what it means to leave our elaborate machinery and accidentals at home.

Vulnerable Reasoning

For it is written in the Law of Moses: "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because whoever plows and threshes should be able to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? If others have

this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more?

But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ. (1 Corinthians 9:9–12, NIV)

A typical strategic question is, "What should we do to forward the gospel?" Then we draw conclusions from this question. But I have learned a great deal from the apostle Paul on how to ask a much more vulnerable strategic question: "What will we bear or put up with that we may cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ?" Roland Allen emphasizes vulnerable reasoning through the apostle Paul's example:

Similarly in the Church there was a class of people who made their living by preaching. St. Paul did not condemn these; on the contrary, he argued that it was legitimate that they should do so. Heathen religion, the Jewish law, Christ's directions, all alike insisted on the right of the minister to receive support. But he himself did not receive it, and he was careful to explain his reason. He saw that it would be a hindrance to his work. "We bear all things," he says, "that we may cause no hindrance to the Gospel of Christ."

Vulnerable Communication

So Paul found himself alone for some time in Athens. He would walk through the city, feeling deeply frustrated about the abundance of idols there. *As in the previous cities*, he went to the synagogue. Once again, he engaged in debate *about* Jesus with both ethnic Jews and devout *Greek-born* converts to *Judaism*. He would even wander around in the marketplace, speaking with anyone he happened to meet. Eventually he got into a debate with some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. Some were dismissive from the start.

Philosophers: What's this fast-talker trying to pitch?

Others: He seems to be advocating the gods of distant lands.

They said this because of what Paul had been preaching about Jesus and the resurrection.

This stirred their curiosity, because

the favorite pastime of Athenians (including foreigners who had settled there) was conversation about new and unusual ideas. So they brought him to the *rock outcropping known as the Areopagus, where Athens' intellectuals regularly gathered for debate*, and they invited him to speak.

Athenians: May we understand this new teaching of yours? It is intriguingly unusual. We would love to know its meaning.

Paul: Athenians, *as I have walked your streets*, I have observed your strong and diverse religious ethos. You truly are a religious people. I have stopped again and again to examine carefully the religious statues and inscriptions that fill your city. On one such altar, I read this inscription: "TO AN UNKNOWN

Christ—transformation—has taken place. So we just move right along. But often, the reality is that there has been a superficial alignment with Christianity, but the worldview—how people intimately view and interact with life—has been untouched, unchallenged, and unchanged. The apostle Paul intentionally discerned the worldview of the people and spoke at the heart of that worldview. Why is this considered vulnerable? Discerning and communicating at the heart of other people's worldview requires a great degree of humility, self-discipline, listening, and relating to others in their comfort zone.

"Jesus is a foreigner" is a common conclusion of many people around the world. Giving people the gospel in a

a variety of beautiful and melodious indigenous musical instruments . . . Over time a whole hymnody of Isaan music has been produced and continues to be written by gifted men and women changed by the grace of God. The church has truly become an indigenous Thai Isaan church that rejoices in using the best forms from their culture to celebrate new life in Christ.⁸

Using the local language (instead of Thai) and music caused the Isaan believers to exclaim, "Jesus talks *our* village talk."⁹ I had an American Christian pastor try to convince me that cross-cultural communicators should not make the effort to use or to facilitate the translation of Scriptures into languages other than what he considered the five global languages (Mandarin-Chinese, Spanish, English, Arabic, and French). I have to say this bothered me intensely. Yes, it is true that some languages are endangered, and some consider their language to be a social and economic impediment. But as an outsider, I will never be the one to suggest or "move a people along" in the direction of abandoning their heart language. As cross-cultural communicators of the gospel, it is we who are to learn the worldview and the language of the local people. We can't lose the motivation and drive to learn people's worldview, heart language, and heart music for the sake of ease on our part or a hidden desire to make everyone become like us.

In conclusion, I suggest that vulnerability in missions is worth a second look—and a long one at that. I personally think that we have wandered a great distance from our "apostolic counterparts of the first century."¹⁰ The apostle Paul "reached" an empire in a decade. I do believe there is something to learn from him. Missionaries clothed in vulnerability allow worldwide boasting to be about the Lord:

Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But

Discerning and communicating at the heart of other people's worldview requires a great degree of humility, self-discipline, listening, and relating to others in their comfort zone.

GOD." I am not here to tell you about a strange foreign deity, but about this One whom you already worship, though without full knowledge. This is the God who made the universe and all it contains, the God who is the King of all heaven and all earth. It would be illogical to assume that a God of this magnitude could possibly be contained in any man-made structure, no matter how majestic. Nor would it be logical to think that this God would need human beings to provide Him with food and shelter—after all, He Himself would have given to humans everything they need—life, breath, *food, shelter, and so on*. (Acts 17:16-25, The Voice)

I think the greatest tragedy of donor-driven and project-driven missions is the neglect of people's worldview. The promise of upward mobility tends to lead to quick results and gives the impression that the deep work of

language not their own and expecting them to express worship with borrowed music and songs is definitely not a vulnerable approach. By the time the gospel reached the Isaan people of Thailand, the message and experience were wrapped in Western and Thai culture. In other words, the Isaan worshipped God with borrowed music and styles—quite unnatural to them. One day, a 90-year-old grandma stood up and danced in an Isaan manner during the worship. Everyone around her shouted, "Sit down grandma!" But, she enthusiastically replied, "No, I am thanking God that you are here today." This grandma's culturally Isaan dance changed everything. Paul DeNeui, a missionary who works in Southeast Asia, explains:

[The events after] Grandma danced changed everything. Dance became a part of worship. And music soon followed . . . Isaan culture has

God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 1:26–31, NIV)

Endnotes

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Jean Johnson, a cross-cultural communicator, spent twenty-three years living and serving among Cambodians in the USA and in Cambodia, specializing in worldview strategic church planting, orality, and reproducible training. Jean is the author of the book *We Are Not The Hero: A Missionary’s Guide to Sharing Christ, Not a Culture of Dependency. Presently with World Mission Associates, Jean coaches and trains pastors, churches, missionaries, organizations, and teams on how to intentionally inspire indigenous people to mobilize their local capabilities, resources, and cultural creativity.*

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zealous Christians may even regard the testimonies of other Christians as void or at best substandard. But a high view of the Open Gospel allows one to rise above Christian infighting and to be less phased by Christian cultural forms whose sectarianism stands in ironic contrast to the message that has spawned them, a message which passes from ear to ear jumping the boundaries separating communities. The Open Gospel is a majestic vision of the essence of Christianity, a vision which not only sees the Gospel as being, at the very least, the world’s best bet for a revelation of the meaning of life, the universe and everything, but also an allusion to timeless and lofty principles from which the vagaries of Christian ethos and culture do not detract.

Appendix 2: Problems, Difficulties and Questions arising from Vulnerable Mission.

1. There seems to be no role for the short term: VM appears to require the long term cultural immersion of the focused, dedicated and exceptional worker. Is this going to be a major barrier to the take up of VM?
2. Is it realistic to expect married missionaries to take their families on to the mission field and subject them to primitive and perhaps even dangerous conditions in the name of VM?
3. Dilemma element: When there is the option of short cutting a problem using Western methods, the VM missionary may face emotional and moral dilemmas.
4. Does Africa have historical and cultural peculiarities that make it a special case continent? How many of the lessons learned here carry over to other third world countries?
5. Does the emergence of the sub-

Saharan lion economies of Africa suggest that in the long term Western development strategy will succeed in pulling Africa into the industrial age by the scruff of the neck?

6. What stance should VM take toward Western development work which has little or no sensitivity to indigenous culture and languages, and takes no cognizance of the benefactor-beneficiary effect on relationships?

7. Will missionaries who are experienced in cross-cultural mission agree on a pure VM strategy, or will there be blended and idiosyncratic applications of its lessons?

8. VM, with its light touch, works beside indigenous churches rather than overtly working against them. Can we come to terms with the fact that Christian sectarianism and peculiar practice and belief is something we may have to live and work with?

9. As a worldview the Western particulate-mechanical paradigm is clearly incomplete and serves Christian missionaries ill when they face the magical cultures of Africa. The Western response is often dualism. VM has exposed this problem, but getting a synthesis out of the thesis and antithesis of “mechanism vs. magic” is still an outstanding problem. (This paper attempts to address this particular issue.)

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What Can Vulnerable Mission Contribute to the Short-term Missions Discussion?

John Henry

The Short Term Missions (STM) topic has been debated and written about exhaustively during the last two to three years in the Anglo-Saxon Western world.¹ Reading about what has been talked, debated, discussed, confronted, I feel like the symptoms or the consequences of STMs, are mostly well identified. In short, many admit these: there are too many STMs, STMers have bad attitude and bad behaviour on the field, STMers don't want to learn and are not effective, STMers are a distraction for long termers, STMers create dependency, etc.

The causes of these symptoms are somehow well identified, but not always. Some causes raised: STMers are not Mission focused, they go for their benefit not the people's they go to (use of STMs to educate the kids about poverty), STMers are not prepared nor trained properly, STMers have biased motivations for going, etc.

The major problem, to me, is the solutions suggested to 'do better'. I feel like these are most of the time oversimplified or inaccurate. That is where Vulnerable Mission may have something to say. I am defining Vulnerable Mission as Christian mission carried out outside of the West using indigenous rather than imported languages and resources.

What can Vulnerable Mission Contribute to the Short Term Missions' Movement?

So what could VM (Vulnerable Mission) contribute? In fact, some things have already been contributed; see Jim Harries' article entitled "The Effectiveness of Short-term Mission to Africa in Respect to Westernising, Christianising and Dependence Creation" on his website.²

However, this article is mostly about singles (or couples) that do a kind of

internship: a few months or one to two years, based on their own motivation to get engaged. During the last few years 'short term' has gone from 'two years' to 'two weeks'. And we now have millions of people going for one to three weeks around the world on 'mission trips'. And those people don't think 'involvement' or 'missions' (even short-term), they think 'trip' and 'dis-

We now have millions of people going for one to three weeks around the world on 'mission trips'. And those people don't think 'involvement' or 'missions' (even short-term), they think 'trip' and 'discovery'.

covery'. We are at a point where we do 'holiday as mission'. I'm persuaded that the phenomenon influenced the way Westerners see missions and helped to remove 'bringing Christ' from missions: the locals do this part (evangelism in the large sense), we only bring the support and aid.

The question is: *What could VM contribute to the Mission Trip idea?* Because obviously, Mission Trips drive the mission practices in another direction

than does VM. I will start from another article by Harries entitled "The Need for use of Local Languages and Resources in Mission to Africa".³ To me, the 'Resources' paragraph of this article (page 3) is a key to understanding how churches in the West think. It helps us understand how they engage in their Mission Trips.

In short, there is a gap between the 'specialists'; missiologists, long term missionaries, mission agencies, professors and such like on one side, and the churches on the other side. The latter find it too complicated and too demanding to go through the specialists. So through the Internet, through a colleague who travels (for studies, work, etc) they find a friend in a church in Africa, Asia or South America, and they 'partner' with it. Or sometimes, they don't find partner churches; they find a

local evangelist and sponsor him. From the West, the deal is simple: we give you the money, you give us the satisfaction of helping the poor (or to be involved in 'missions' without our needing to be on the field), plus you give us the opportunity to send a team of ours to have a great experience in your place. From the receiving church, the deal is interesting: we receive money for free and without conditions (if the conditions are too difficult, it must be possible to find

another church that has lower ones), the cost of having thirty kids for two weeks every summer is acceptable. From a 'specialist' point of view, it gets harder and harder to communicate with the churches: you are always the bad guy, who has requirements, standards, who actually asks a lot, too much from a church perspective.

At first, we could think that VM and Mission Trips are in total contradiction. From one perspective it's true: VM says "learn the language in order to use it", Mission Trippers say "we have only two weeks, we can't (and don't want to) learn language." VM says, "don't come with external resources, use local resources," Mission Trippers say "we don't have much more than money to contribute." VM says "understand the local context

ministry, and let's say they are related to an Indonesian church and participate in their local outreach, they can do VM for three weeks. But this kind of case is 0.0000000001% of Mission trips; or less.

Most of the Mission Trips are taken by inexperienced young people who want to 'do something clever during their holiday' or by church people who want to 'bring practical help' without getting involved for more than 2 weeks.

Interestingly enough, VM does not seek to have the whole Mission World work in the vulnerable way; the description of vulnerable mission says "...some Western missionaries". As much as it is a voice that suggests a marginal way in the global missions trend, I believe it has something to say to the global Mission Trips topic. Here are my suggestions,

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and use the local way to do things," Mission Trippers say "the world is a village (we are all the same), so what works for us works for elsewhere, and we don't have time to waste on understanding the local context". We could obviously add a few more statements.

Although, when everyone tries to give advice on how to 'regulate' Mission Trips and give suggestions on how to do better, VM does not really seem to have good advice on how Mission Trips could be done in a Vulnerable Way.

Of course there are marginal possibilities: for example, let's say you have a bunch of Westerners who have all been involved in reaching Indonesians in their Western inner city, and now speak Indonesian. If they go to Indonesia for three weeks using Indonesian and don't bring outside resources in the

with regards to what has been just written about symptoms of STMs, causes of these symptoms and how churches from the West could improve their involvement with their friend/partner churches in the rest of the world.

Can a Mission Trip be a Vulnerable Mission Trip?

Everything seems to say that the answer is no, except if you do Mission Trips within your own culture (or a similar one), one in which you can use the local language and local resources. Although encouraging local outreaches is a good idea, it does not really address the question of missionary work from the West to the non-Western world.

Obviously, some advice could be given to a team so that the Mission Trip would be 'more' Vulnerable than it intended to

be: it can go using less outside resources than intended, and find ways to use local languages (have a translator on their side). But in the end, if you go too far, many Mission Trips will find this kind of thing too demanding, especially if the first (or only) foundation for a partnership between the sending church in the West and the receiving church is financial.

So basically, I would say that there are high expectations you can fix as encouragements for a team, and you can reduce harm, but you can almost never have a Mission Trip (with 'non-specialists' from a church) be 'Vulnerable'.

Why VM Should Not Engage with Short Term Mission Discussions but Show an Alternative

One good idea, from my perspective, would be to encourage churches to stop organizing Mission Trips. But honestly it's lost in advance. I follow Jacques Ellul who says that as long as something is technologically affordable, it "has to be used" (the means determine the end and not the opposite).⁴ So as long as Western churches are rich enough, and as long as oil is cheap enough to take airplanes to the other side of the world, there will be Mission Trips.

So I would say that VM must work upstream. VM advocates are to encourage Western churches to get involved in missions the vulnerable way and show a positive example (not only a 'don't'). Let's encourage churches not to follow the mainstreams, especially the mainstreams of the world (more money, more power), and come back to be a subversive society that shows another way. It might be very useful to take time to explain and show all the symptoms (and their causes) of STMs.

Long term VM involvement may not seem to be an alternative way to Mission Trips at first because we consider the duration, the two to three weeks, as the basis of reference. So an acceptable

alternative would be a Mission Trip of two to three weeks, but done differently.

But VM can show that the length of involvement is an important question: you cannot just do a random 'task' for either twenty years or two weeks depending on your level of interest and time at disposal. The length is a part of the task, and I would suggest that VM can show the importance of this. Short Term Missions is not just normal Missions but on a short scale: its length defines its nature; because you go for a short duration, then you will do this and not that. And it's quite easy to show that if you want to be involved in a community the Vulnerable Way, it takes more time than a Mission Trip can offer.

In this sense VM is an alternative to Mission Trips: instead of going for two weeks, give your life. Instead of bringing the power of the West while bringing the gospel, bring the power of the gospel without the power of the West; and that will take a lifetime (or at least many years).

One thought for Americans mostly: I've been following what David Platt wrote about Radicalism⁵. To me, he touches a very good point about the Western Christian Lifestyle. He says as he was searching for what being a disciple of Jesus is, his reflections brought him naturally to missions. Now, he did not write or talk a lot about the practice of missions, but he advocates Mission Trips. It could be interesting to contact him, have a talk and make suggestions to him about mission practices (I'm pretty sure his next book will be on missions). For example, as he claims that being a disciple is not seeking the American dream, it's about giving up our rights and our lives, why bring an "American dream gospel" to the world using resources and languages from the US?

I know that most VM advocates are scholars or field missionaries, but aren't there any 'promoters' in the Western World that could seek to contact these

kinds of influential people? VM includes naturally ... being vulnerable. It requires being dead to yourself, for you are exposed to more risks, failures, critics, etc. Knowing that, I would encourage the 'radical' trend in the West. Westerners who may be involved in Vulnerable Mission must know the cost and be ready to pay it.

So VM advocates could have this kind of talk with a church that seeks financial partnerships with the non-West (including Mission Trips). Instead of being willing to 'lift them' to your material level in giving them your money and language, why not abandon yourself, abandon your possessions and go to them at their level; reaching them through other than your money and language?

In the long run, a church could take the step of having people learn the language of the people of their 'friend church' in order to use it, and have a 'vulnerable' partnership. But would an African or an Asian church accept this kind of 'partnership'? What would be their interest?

What Can a Vulnerable Missionary Do with a Mission Trip Team Coming to Him?

As I said, Mission Trips will continue anyway. So, as a receiver of a team (or as an intermediate), what can you do if a team wants to come? Maybe a field missionary could give better advice than me, but I would say this: A Vulnerable Missionary can accept a team with conditions: In addition to the 'basic' ones (size of the team, not coming with tonnes of material, behaving appropriately etc), they should not spend money on locals, and they should come as 'visitors' and people who want to learn rather than missionaries who want to do something. Then it is possible for the missionary to promote Vulnerable Mission in explaining why they are here to the team, what the

local Vulnerable Ministry is, and how one can be involved in this context as a Vulnerable Missionary.

Another suggestion that could make me want to join a team is to get involved in things that don't include either language or resources. I'm thinking of intercession/praying teams. If the teams are already here, why not suggest to them to just walk by places and pray? Obviously, many Westerners won't like it as it's not 'doing something', but some might agree.

Conclusion: Is It Worth It?

The main question remaining to me: is it worth the cost? Is it relevant to spend time and energy trying to fix Mission Trips or to raise concerns in the Western churches about Mission Trips with regard to Vulnerable Mission? Part of the answer lies in this article. As a 'pessimist realist' (realist, but only seeing the negative part of it), I would say that it is not worth it. That should not be a major focus of VM; the fight is lost in advance.

What is worth the cost is to continue practicing Vulnerable Mission and promoting it. Mission Trips are a part of the global Mission trend. Vulnerable Mission doesn't seek to fix the global Mission trend; it seeks to suggest an alternative. So let us promote VM gladly, showing that it is also an alternative to Mission Trips.

Endnotes

1. Coming from a French-speaking European context, I feel as if the debate has not really entered the non-English-speaking Western world for now. So even if I'm looking from a Western perspective, it might not be the same as an American or an English perspective (for example).
2. www.jim-mission.org.uk/articles/effectiveness-of-short-term-mission-to-africa.html
3. www.jim-mission.org.uk/articles/need.pdf
4. This is a personal interpretation of Ellul's work on Technology.
5. See his books here: www.radicalthebook.com and here: www.followmebook.org and his talk at Urbana13: <http://vimeo.com/56508165>.

The J.H. Bavinck Reader

Edited by John Bolt, James D. Bratt, and Paul J. Visser. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013,

— *Reviewed by Stan Nussbaum*, D.Th. (U. of South Africa), Staff Missiologist for GMI Research Services and initiator of the “Messianic Year” Project

How valuable is mid-20th century missiology for early 21st century mission? If this book is any indicator, it is very valuable indeed. The editors have done missiology a great service by compiling updated translations of two books and two essays by J. H. Bavinck, prefaced by about 30 pages each on his biography, theology of religion, and missiology. Bavinck’s work may be of most significance to missiology in an unexpected way—as

and the *Mysticism of the East* (1934) retitled *Christ and Asian Mysticism* in this volume, ch. 7–11. The “religious consciousness” section provides a very useful five-point framework for discussing and evaluating the topic. Bavinck holds that the five universally occurring aspects of it are a sense of “totality” (something far greater than individual consciousness), morality/conscience, contact with a higher power, a need for deliverance, and a tension between fate and freedom. The interconnections of the five are intriguing (199–204). A challenging assignment for graduate students would be to read Bavinck and reflect on what has changed and what has not in the debate on religious consciousness.

Christ and Asian Mysticism is not nearly as arcane as the title may sound.

BAVINCK’S THESIS IS that Asia assumes we can find the religious answer by connecting with something deep inside ourselves, while Christians are bringing a solution from outside.

sessing and engaging the “moralistic therapeutic deism” of American youth (Smith and Denton, 2005)—though he is significant for a wide range of more typical missiological issues as well.

Bavinck (1895–1964) was a Dutch missiologist whose field experience in Indonesia in the 1920s and 1930s engaged him firsthand with Islam, Hinduism, Chinese Buddhism, and indigenous religions. Hendrik Kraemer (*The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*) was his mentor and colleague there.

The books are *Religious Consciousness and Christian Faith* (1949) and *Christ*

To be sure, Asian cosmologies are enigmatic to a Westerner, but Bavinck’s sketches are very helpful. His basic thesis is that Asia assumes we can find the religious answer by connecting with something deep inside ourselves, while Christians are bringing a solution from outside. Asia’s goal is mystical merger; the Christian goal is non-mystical reconciliation. Bavinck balances his objective insights into Asian religions with his missionary passion in admirable ways throughout the book.

Bavinck’s style is crisp and cogent, often surprisingly apropos to current issues. For example, this oxymoron on

Asian perception of the gospel: “It is alien, yet so trustworthy. It is different, yet so similar” (276). Or this on the export of Western systematic theology: “Our dogmatic approach, which in our estimation causes us to introduce all sorts of theoretical concepts too quickly, too often gets in the way of announcing this joyful message. Mission work is [should be] characterized by saying it all, but measured by the standard of not saying it all at once” (141).

Bavinck provides several historical panoramas, helpfully tracing an idea through thinkers such as Spinoza, Hegel, Schleiermacher, and Barth, though this may lose some undergraduates. His final page describes the glorious potential Asians have as disciples because of their cultural starting-points, a tribute and a prophecy no colonialist would have uttered.

One needs to be more Calvinistic than this reviewer in order to embrace Bavinck’s core position that there is nothing whatsoever in a human being that can naturally connect with the gospel when it is proclaimed (“speaking an emphatic and convicted ‘no’ to all human religious consciousness,” 299). Why not reduce his long list of mind-boggling hypothetical questions about general revelation to the final practical question about presenting the gospel? (274–275).

The editors puzzlingly say Bavinck’s theory of mission had “a profound salvation-historical orientation, and a balanced ecclesiocentric approach” (73), but this reviewer did not see much emphasis on the People of God theme or on the grand narrative of Scripture.

This review admittedly only scratches the surface. Hopefully readers can see enough of the gold underneath to be motivated to do some more scratching of their own.

Akan Christology:

An Analysis of the Christologies of John Samuel Pobee and Kwame Bediako in Conversation with the Theology of Karl Barth

By Charles Sarpong Aye-Addo. Eugene: Pickwick, 2013.

—Reviewed by Diane B. Stinton, Associate Professor of Mission Studies, Regent College

Charles Sarpong Aye-Addo introduces Christology as the dominant issue in the development of contemporary African theology. As his subtitle indicates, “Conversation” features largely in his approach to the subject. Selecting two prominent theologians from the Akan people of Ghana, John Pobee and Kwame Bediako, Aye-Addo engages critically with their Christologies by placing them in conversation with the theology of Karl Barth, a foremost 20th century European theologian.

The major focus of discussion is the image of Jesus as Ancestor, a Christological paradigm advocated by several leading theologians across Africa. While Aye-Addo affirms his commitment to formulating African Christology that is meaningful and relevant in African contexts (xx), he critiques Pobee and Bediako for employing the indigenous Akan category of ancestor to explicate and appropriate Christ for African Christians. To caution against the uncritical identification of the gospel with any ethnicity or cultural construct, Aye-Addo draws Karl Barth into the conversation, highlighting his theologies of Revelation and the Incarnation of the Word and

their implications for Christological methodology. The overriding purpose of this work is twofold: to critically examine the content and methodologies of Pobee’s and Bediako’s Ancestor Christologies, respectively, and “to argue for a more authentic Akan Christology that could be faithful to indigenous thought, without moving away from a biblical framework” (xix).

The conversational stance is both enticing, drawing the reader into the Christological discussion, and ef-

A MAJOR CONTRIBUTION of Aye-Addo’s work lies in his approach of integrating Christological reflections from leading African theologians with those from a prominent European theologian.

fective in structuring it. Following a general introduction, Aye-Addo offers an overview of Akan cosmology that is fundamental to analyzing the Akan Christological reflections. He then enters into critical conversation with his interlocutors, first with Pobee and Bediako together, as Akan theologians who integrate biblical and indigenous categories to develop their Ancestor Christologies. Next, he dialogues with Karl Barth, whose theological reflections on Revelation, the divinity and humanity of Christ, plus the Trinity, provide guidelines in assessing the role of the Bible and the appropriateness of the image of Ancestor in the Akan

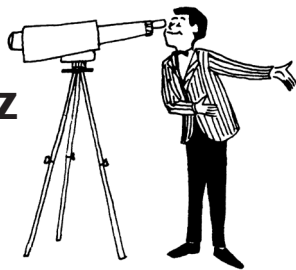
Christologies. Finally, Aye-Addo concludes with an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the Ancestor Christological paradigm and an initial sketch for proposing Jesus as mediator, based on Paul’s vision in 2 Corinthians 5 depicting “God was in Christ” (176).

A major contribution of Aye-Addo’s work lies in his approach of integrating Christological reflections from leading African theologians with those from a prominent European theologian. In the process, he identifies and addresses key issues in constructing and analyzing Christology today, such as the role of the Bible, the relation between the local and the universal, the place of culture in gospel proclamation and theological reflection, and the significance of the doctrine of the Trinity in Christological

faith and practice. Regarding local theological developments, Aye-Addo is especially well placed as a fellow Ghanaian to critically assess the Akan Ancestral Christologies proposed by Pobee and Bediako, probing the various nuances of the image from local perspective on Akan cosmology. With respect to global theological developments, Aye-Addo rightfully highlights the significance of Africa within contemporary world Christianity. His approach of mutually engaging distinct Christologies from Africa and Europe is salutary in signalling directions for the ongoing study of global Christology.

Continued on page 20

As seen
through
the **LENZ**



Much has been written and discussed regarding Short Term Mission (STM), the pros and cons of its effectiveness. This edition of *OB* deals with a parallel concept to that topic. Vulnerable Mission (VM) is discussed by our three authors, and its impact on short term missions. Vulnerable Mission as defined by John

Henry is “Christian mission carried out outside of the West using indigenous rather than imported languages and resources.” Tim Reeves gives an overview and at times a technical approach to the topic, but eventually he leads into the essence of VM. The other two authors will be helpful in applying the concept in their thinking.

We have also included a couple of book reviews on the *J.H. Bavinck Reader*, and *Akan Christology*, an analysis of African Christology. You will find this review most interesting, and possibly want to investigate this topic more carefully.

—Bob Lenz, editor

Akan Christology
Continued from page 19

Aye-Addo also makes an important contribution in highlighting crucial issues of theological method, often neglected in African theology. His aim is to appropriate both biblical and Akan resources to formulate a Christology that is “distinctively Christian and authentically African” (xxvii). One might well question some of Aye-Addo’s premises: for example, (1) the degree of similarity between the historical and theological contexts of Barth in Germany and of Pobee and Bediako in Ghana, which understandably give rise to their divergent views on theological methodology; or (2) that Pobee’s and Bediako’s Akan Christologies merely “substitute African cultural assumptions in the place of Euro-American cultural assumptions as the source and criterion for ‘authentic’ African Christology—rather than attempting to explore the possibility of a ‘biblical’ Christology” (xxi); or (3) that Pobee and particularly Bediako move away from the biblical witness to the extent that Aye-Addo avers. Nonetheless, Aye-Addo’s deeply stimulating conversation certainly makes a significant contribution to the ongoing development of theology and mission worldwide. Scholars, students and lay people from Africa, Europe, or elsewhere will undoubtedly benefit from engaging with Aye-Addo’s work.