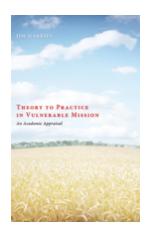# REVIEW & PREVIEW

From Theory to Practice in Vulnerable Mission: an academic appraisal

Harries, Jim
Oregon: Wipf and Stock. 2012
Review by Tim Reeves

By way of putting this review in context I would like to say something about what lead up to my interest in Vulnerable Mission.

My interest in mission is very much from the perspective of being a member of a supporting church. But really I suppose I ought to be frank: I was never really interested in mission. Mission events came round and I did my best to pay all due interest and make a donation. Missionary work was for others, not for me, and as rule I let them get on with it!

I have to confess that my real interest is and has always been in a variety of technical subjects; in particular what I refer to as the three Ps: physics, programming and philosophy. In fact now that I am now a semi retired person I'm able to spare the time, in an amateur capacity, dabbling in a broad range of technical interests.

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? There must be something strange going on here!

Well firstly there is, of course, the Gospel, which I regard as nothing less than 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 swath of Christian culture was an inchoate squabbling mass of bigoted partisans; in particular I'm thinking about Christianity's many sectarian and cultish manifestations.

 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 and 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 yet paradoxically in God's boundless grace they are conveyances of Gospel.

As I continued to ponder this fascinating issue of the variegated nature of Christian culture I started reviewing Jim Harries' journals from Africa: Unlike many upbeat missionary reports Jim's journals contained a very authentic and raw African experience; he was clearly getting very close to its 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 or

superstitious elaboration. In fact to call them churches seemed to stretch the term to breaking point. But in a sense it was little different to what I'd seen in the West in terms of sectarianism, although with an African cultural overlay. So it seemed to me that this was 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 Christian community is as messy work in progress wherever you go.

Now here's my second connection: In 1971 I read Edward De Bono's well known book "The Mechanism of Mind". 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 certain aspects of mind 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. The result was a simulated word association network or concept network.

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 may associate, the word "cellulose". From cellulose you may associate "wood" and from there on to "tree". And if I repeated the experiment yet again the result would quite likely be still different. What this shows is that single concepts are in fact nodes in an intricate network of association. When words come in they act as stimuli activating huge haloes of association. Because they 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 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 different people of different cultures. When one considers words and their effects one is really dealing with something that is very, very open ended.

The trouble is we have been somewhat mislead by the superficial similarity between the logical use of language such as we see in 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 to propositional logic.

Vulnerable Mission has a slogan we now all know. That is: "Vulnerable Mission is mission that uses local resources and local languages". Well here's a slogan about natural language that we also might like to pick up:

Natural Language is about *connotation,* not notation.

You see, mathematical languages are about notation; that is, the formal and carefully defined manipulation of symbols; this kind of language is very portable. But this is not to be confused with natural language which is not readily portable. The tokens of natural language trigger off, by virtue of CONNOTATION, huge 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.

So that's a brief resume of one of my hobbies and I add it because this work on language was the second connection I made with Jim's work. The subject of language takes us neatly into the first two chapters of the book I am reviewing and these chapters deal with the non-portability of natural language.

(Chapter 1&2: Non portability of language). In chapter 1 we are shown that that comparing two languages is a bit like comparing two jig saw puzzles: It is entirely inappropriate to attempt a one to one mapping between the pieces of two 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 picture is very different to the African jigsaw picture. 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. In chapter 2 we are given an example of how what appears to be a very innocuous question is, in many African contexts, actually taboo. 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 can be read that you are sizing the children up for bewitchment. (p34). These two chapters definitely leave us 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 learnt if one is familiar with the context in which it is useful

In **Chapter 3** we come to that second big issue which concerns Vulnerable Mission and this is the effect of Western resources on the African psyche. The chapter is entitled **Development projects and outside Funding**: Here we hear about the fallacy of applying historical materialism as an all inclusive theory of society. Historical materialism has its roots in Marxism and is the hypothesis that economics is the variable that determines the nature of society. Therefore it is thought that if you take control of this variable you have control of a society. Trouble is, the hardware of human nature and the firmware of human culture are not being factored in here. As a result Jim suspects, for example, that the Millennium Development project of halving global poverty by 2015 may be unrealistic. On the face of it seems that by controlling the purse strings of development projects the West ostensively has control of the critical variable of change. And yet for undisclosed reasons, no doubt bound up with the African world view, development never finds the critical mass of industrial self ignition. Instead the shrewd Africa psyche quickly learns how to pick the fruits of Western production, without the need to plant the tree of production itself. It's called "dependency" by some but others might just call it a clever survival strategy. Natural language importabilities, need I say, are implicated as effectively covering up this situation.

Chapter 4: Asks the question **What is Africa?** Jim tells us that Western scholars underestimate the difference between Africa and the West; either that or they don't take those differences seriously. Witchcraft is ignored perhaps because it is thought that it will simply retreat in the face of economic advance; basically that's an application of the philosophy of historical materialism. But Witchcraft as part of the way of African life is proving very resilient. "*The dead are the real rulers of the country*" one author is quoted as saying. Only theology can address such beliefs; economics cannot do it alone. However, there is a caveat here: Difference between Africa and the West is in actual fact a very sensitive subject as it can raise the spectre of racism. Because of this sensitivity cultural differences don't get factored into Western development programs; in fact the philosophy of historical materialism encourages the difference to be ignored.

All this really brings us to "**Theology in Africa**" which is in fact the subject of **chapter 5**: This chapter Opens with the question of "*Do Africans believe in God?*" This question has certainly intrigued me: [*All nations Christian college library experience*] In this chapter Jim quotes an author who says Africans do believe in God. But this is problematical if this observation is based on a translation of the African into English. It seems that the African names for God have the connotation of an ambient impersonal vital force or spirit permeating the cosmic background. [*Reference Book: The World's Religions may hint at this: God is shown as an all-embracing Being here and this is close to the idea of a surrounding ambient vital force.*]

This African view of God may not be all wrong: Recall that passage in Acts 17: 27-28 endorsing a Greek concept of God: I quote: "*He is not far from each one of us for in Him we live and move and have our being – as also some of your poets have said*". Understanding the paradox of God's immanence and eminence is as tricky in the West as it is in Africa. Given these subtleties it seems that we are not easily going to get to the root of African ideas about God without the use of African language; for without that language who knows what nuances are going to be lost in translation.

Chapter 6 is the concluding chapter and it addresses the subject of "**Vulnerable Mission in Practice**". The rallying cry and slogan of VM as we well know is: "*Mission using local languages and resources*". It is a way of circumventing the unauthentic and asymmetrical relationships that result when you have a Western Benefactor and an African Beneficiary. VM is also, according to Jim, the way of Jesus, because Jesus did not make recourse to his Divine power in order to bring about political and material liberation. I would personally want to add that the tensions inherent in Divine self denial characterise the whole approach of God through Christ. However the VM method raises inherent practical issues and questions that are addressed in this chapter. For example

1. The question of how the Vulnerable Missionary should relate to conventional mission; he or she probably needs to be somewhat distanced from conventional mission in order to appear not linked to it

2. The need to respect the confidences of locals and be an authentic friend.

3. Being prepared to swap between indigenous and Western live styles and cope with complications this may cause.

4. There is a need for back up and encouragement of friends and confidants who support VM.

5. Be aware of the inevitable dilemma element that VM brings; when it seems that the missionary could call in western resources to tackle a situation he may find that the long term interest is better served by deferring his potential power just as Jesus did.