VULNERABLE MISSION AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO FAILING AID PARADIGMS: FACING REALITY ON REACHING AFRICA

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INTRODUCTION

This short essay provides a brief review of the reasons for advocating the vulnerability of development workers and missionaries from the West in their interaction(s) with the 'poor' world, particularly Africa. The blurring of the distinction between development workers and missionaries is intentional, as the 'development' project is assumed to be motivated by Christian values, and the true Christian missionary to be concerned for the holistic well being of those s/he is reaching.

The Reality of language

Westerners may be laying the foundations for their own deception. Where do people's understanding of who they are, who God is, and what the World is, come from? Clearly not from spoken (or written) words alone. How can lower order inputs or 'mechanical matter' such as varying wavelengths of sound or "little dark marks" on paper (Sperber and Wilson 1995:1) produce higher order comprehension like human consciousness (Gunton 1985:29)? Human intelligence and self-understanding cannot arise from mechanical effects alone.

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What happens when African children are brought up in familiar (to them) contexts, but are 'educated' in a language that comes from vastly foreign (unknown, invisible) contexts? (As is nowadays happening up and down the continent.) Because the contextual rules / connections assumed by the new language do not connect to 'real life' for the African child, they are learned by rote. Because that new language does not connect to real life, it is put into a separate mental category labeled 'foreign'. This 'foreign' category must be handled with care – it not making sense in the local context means that applying it in or to the local context creates confusion. (Hence Chinua Achebe's famous novel is entitled: *Things Fall Apart* (Achebe 1958).)

An introduced language, such as English, while of little use in African homes, is found to have value in the formal sector. It can in fact be extremely lucrative, if used in the right places at the right times. Those words (sounds) that are pointless at home, have a point of reference somewhere else, because if pronounced boldly to people from Europe or America they result in smiles, pleasure, visits and even gifts of lots of money.

I may be exaggerating above, but I think not all too strongly. What the West has done by subsidizing its language and education around the world (devoid of course of its context) is to create a global (almost) screen of apparent comprehension and communication that conceals what is *really going on* in different communities. The language is powerful, so people want it. It can generate enormous funds for them. Unfortunately the original owners of this language are deceived if they think that the use of familiar (to them) terms demonstrates familiar meanings. English words used by non-English people will often be implicit translations of *their* terms. Because millions of children around the world, certainly Africa, are spending 4, 6, 8, 10 or more of the prime years of their youth and childhood rote-learning these mysterious codes, relations between Africa and the rest of the globe are being built on weak foundations rooted in deception.

Limited space prevent me from further unpacking the vagaries of so called 'translation' that occur on the margins and junctions of African and Western linguistic worlds. Suffice it to say that as a result when it comes to discourse on Africa, it is hard to know what to believe.

The Reality of Aid

Reading early (or even later) accounts of life in Africa, or visiting the continent, should make it clear that the way of life of African people results in their living in what in Western English can be termed 'poverty'. This is not confined to isolated pockets of the continent. Whatever influence physical contexts such as soil and climate have on it, they clearly do not cause it, because it is found across vast varieties of vegetation, rainfall, altitudes and soil types. That it is a feature of the life of the people is further evidenced by the fact that different peoples (such as Europeans or Indians) do not automatically 'become poor' when they go to live in Africa.

Peoples have chosen to live in certain ways. These are not usually conscious rational choices made at a moment in time in the light of some set of 'total options available', but choices made from limited sets of interconnected alternatives handed down through generations, that determine and limit the inclinations of living cohorts. Choices have been made (and continue to be made) in the light of contexts (real and perceived), deeply held values, understanding of what it is to be human, and the god(s) that influence the human state. Choices made by African fore-fathers have been extremely successful in many ways – in preserving the continuation of life over many generations and populating a vast continent. Few would deny the beauty of the deeply held values of brotherhood and respect held by many African people. At the same time, the lifestyle perpetuated is one referred to in the West as 'poverty'.

The likely effect of the provision of outside 'aid' to Africa is an increase in wants / needs. Then follows the problem of how to meet the resultant increasing cravings? The common answer is more aid (and dependence on charity and all that it implies) and corruption – usually the two in combination. This is all too often the impact of the West on Africa today – an immoral impact devaluing what it is to be human, ignoring God, accentuating immoral values of greed and (see above) propagating ignorance through promoting foreign languages over and above those that are locally understood. Contrary to popular (Western) naivety, the production of needs does not in itself undo centuries of deeply ingrained cultural habituation.

The Reality of 'who they are'

People are defined by relationship. Who to you may be 'an old lady' to me can be 'mum! My boss, may be your nephew, and so on.

An excellent readable and graphic rendering of who Africans 'are' in their interaction with Westerners living on the African Continent today has been produced by David Maranz in his

book *African Friends and Money Matters.* I highly recommend it as reading for any Westerner wanting to work with African people. (While there are vast regional differences between parts of Sub-Saharan Africa there are also, as Maranz points out, many similarities (Maranz 2001:11).) African peoples and societies are not blank slates, waiting for Westerners to write on them. Consideration of impacts on Africa that only take into account the Western side, are inadequate. The dynamic of interaction arises through the meeting of great civilizations, and not a civilization with a *tableau rasa*!

Maranz explains many aspects of these interactions, helping us especially by focusing on economic issues, in relation to friendships. Friendships, Maranz tells us, are in Africa formed around economic interdependence (Maranz 2001:65). The subjection of clients to wealthy patrons is *not* a system introduced by 'the West'. The system was already there and deeply ingrained. The role frequently given to Westerners in Africa is clear – they are patrons. Falling into this African category has many implications. The category brings pre-existing expectations into effect. As any other relationship such as 'teacher / student' or 'father / child' imply obligations as well as privileges on both sides, so also the relationship of patron to client in Africa. There are privileges that should be welcomed, and obligations that should be fulfilled by patrons and clients. Failure to properly meet these will cause misunderstanding and tensions.

Whereas true friendship is in the West valued if it is not linked to material or financial dependence, friendships in Africa frequently imply dependence. ("A disinterested friendship is [in Africa] something without sense" says Maranz (2001: 65).) He who 'has' is *expected* to help a friend who hasn't, if he is to be a true friend. ("Friendships … are [in Africa]… maintained with gifts." (Maranz 2001:72)) He who has in turn receives praise. Loans are not repaid until the giver of the loan is poorer (worse off) than the original beneficiary says Maranz (2001:52). Debts are collected by the person who is owed, and the debtor is not expected to repay unless or until demanded (Maranz 2001:154). Many more illustrations of 'African friendships' could be added.

This is *not* to say that Maranz is absolutely correct. There may well be deficiencies in his book. Yet I add my voice to those who verify that he has hit on important truths that ought to be much more widely known.

One could add that even those African people who were not in the past accustomed to patron/client systems have since adapted to them. Foreigners coming from the West almost

invariably seek to fill patron roles. In places where hunger is endemic, and 'needs' have been multiplied (by provision of education, medical services, consumer goods etc. etc.) it is not difficult to find people who are ready to be (or even desperate to be) clients.

The fact that this system of living may be unfamiliar to or even despised by the West does not prevent it from continuing in Africa. Much more could be said of it. One important thing for patrons to realize is that the dependency of clients easily restricts communication. 'You don't bite the hand that feeds you!' This is not so bad if all parties are from the same or a similar culture i.e. they already understand one another well, but results in the perpetuation of ignorance of patrons who are of a foreign ethnicity.

The Reality of the Gospel

Roland Allen argued profusely for a separation between missionary work and colonial interests almost 100 years ago. (In asking which missionary methods we should use, St. Paul's or Ours? (Allen 1927).) 'Paul did not work that way' he said, in reference to colonial (or neo-colonial) models of mission. (Allen attacked particularly the practice of doing Christian mission with money, emphasising that Paul never used finance to forward his mission (Allen 1927: 66ff).) That Allen continues to attract the attention of missiologists, is shown by Wickeri's writing about his contribution as recently as 2005 (Wickeri 2005).

But I suggest that Allen has not been taken sufficiently seriously by the missiological fraternity. The Scriptures clearly promote non-colonial models of mission. The temptations demonstrate Jesus' refusal to follow conventional routes to the acquisition of power. He refused to feed people, or to acquire followers by amazing them through miraculous acts, or through following Satan's methods (Matthew 4:1-11, Luke 4:1-13). Jesus' ministry was always carried out from a position of vulnerability and weakness. He had no political office. There is scanty evidence for the organisation of any sort of administration or means for handling or dispersing funds on Jesus' part.

There is certainly no Biblical basis for recent 'project' orientations to mission. We find no hospitals, no (formal) schools, no bore-holes, no orphanages, no provision of dairy cows or chicken projects, no advocating of hybrid crops, no teaching of foreign languages and no complex administrative structures set up in the Scriptures. However these things may or may not have arisen; there seems to be no Biblical basis for them. (These are considered by Westerners

to be means for the expression of Christian love and care, the role that many such institutions fill in Western nations. I am questioning the legitimacy of such a Scriptural hermeneutic.)

While it may not be appropriate to argue from negatives, perhaps there is a case to be made for doing mission in a Biblical way, in lands where life is after all often said to be much more 'biblical' in its basis than it is in the West. Certainly this could avoid many of the pitfalls that 'mission' tends to fall foul of today (see above).

Beginning with Reality

Mission and development initiatives these days rarely begin with reality on the ground. The reasons for this already explored include the use of other than local languages in all planning, and an assumption that 'the poor' of the world will be passive recipients of whatever they are offered. Other underlying assumptions of classic development projects include that the world's problems are caused by and therefore can be resolved by material provision of some sort. People's cultures are implicitly assumed to be equally capable of economic and material advance, if only certain obstinate but clearly visible barriers (such as poor farming methodology, ignorance of hygiene, lack of water) could be overcome. This grossly over-simplistic view of life is to blame for much blundering by Westerners in the Third world today.

I suggest that it is time to get back to a realization of the complexity of life, and for the need for effective change to be generated from the inside. The key starting point for success in mission or development activities is to get into the inside. Connections between spiritual, social and material life can only be ascertained from the inside. Challenging these in the light of God's revelation and the nature of the church requires a foreign missionary to remain vulnerable to the people. Any failure to remain vulnerable will result in an inability to attend to and listen carefully to what is going on – especially in cultures accustomed to patron/client systems in which clients become 'yes-men'. Only ongoing vulnerability to their host community will prevent missionaries from forcing practices onto people that are frankly unhelpful or impractical.

We have already found that languages do not easily translate from one culture to another. In fact, not only is it not easy, but because all the roots of a language are in a culture, a text *cannot* be accurately translated into a context where those roots or foundations are absent. Translation needs to be of the impact, implicatures, political (power) implications and so on of language; not

only of meaning. (For different approaches to translation see for example Mojola (2003).) Such 'translation' (in the broad sense of the term) can only be done by people who have a close understanding of the two (or more) cultures between which translation is occurring. Such an understanding of another culture can, I suggest, only be acquired by someone's being vulnerable to it. The current climate of economic and political domination by the West means that special efforts are required by a Westerner to achieve such vulnerability. A vital prerequisite for a Western person's success in promoting long-term development or the Gospel of Christ is self-depowerment, to ensure connection with local reality.

Dual Identity

The ways of life to which Westerners are these day accustomed, makes it difficult for them to be vulnerable to those peoples in the world who are classed as 'the poor'. A state of vulnerability to the poor has at times disparagingly been called 'going native'. Achieving it in totality may be extremely distressing, resulting in a person becoming cut off and a stranger to their own people (i.e. their culture of origin). In a world in which physical appearance is such a clear indicator of one's culture and economic status (the difference between 'black' and 'white' in Africa) becoming incorporated into a 'poor' community is especially difficult. The only practical missiological solution that I can see – is for a Westerner to have a 'dual identity'.

By a 'dual identity' I mean that a Western missionary must have access to a context in which they can express their 'Western selves', and then another ministry-context in which they deny or put aside their 'Western selves' so as to be able to interact closely and constructively (i.e. other than as a patron) with local people. The problem with the old 'mission station' approach was that the context of interaction with nationals was the contrived pseudo 'Western' one on the station. I suggest that a Western station be considered a site for retreat, but that ministry should be on local people's terms, and under their conditions, beyond its boundaries.

This way of working has parallels with the incarnational model of missions. (As promoted by John Stott, according to Reese 2005:np.) Christ himself denied the powers of his divine identity in order to minister to earth-bound people. (I concede that this analogy easily becomes unhelpful as, contrary to appearances from much of Africa, the white man is not a god.) The need for it to be emphasized to Westerners arises largely from the gross inequalities found in today's world, and the need to undo damage done by previous generations.

An intentional embracing of vulnerability by those with apparent superior knowledge of development may not seem reasonable. But, spiritual ministry has long been an apparent contradiction to material progress. Prophets and those who have served in Temples can be accused of having contributed to poverty by removing themselves from the productive sector of the workforce! Yet this is the Biblical model of mission given to us. Missionaries need to deny their ability to proffer immediate 'help' for the sake of moving closer to a people so as to acquire understanding that will in the long term be of more wide-spread and long-term advantage.

Making peculiar provision for oneself in one's ministry need not necessarily be ruled out in the above proposed way of operating. For example, should the foreign missionary need to insist on having a special diet, personal transport such as by motorbike, or even medication. (Local people will in my experience be considerate of the different needs of a foreigner coming from a different culture and having been brought up in a different place, providing of course that they do not suggest that these aspects of their culture ought to be universal or are superior.) The missionary will realise that the more s/he leans upon such 'personal helps' the more barriers will be put up with local people. The 'personal' nature of such 'personal helps' must also be emphasized. They are not to be shared with or passed onto national colleagues. (Unless they can be shared in a way that does not lead to 'dependence' – which is unlikely.) The less that these are used the better, especially by someone who is still young and fit, so as not to interfere with the progress of ministry.

Conclusion

A careful consideration of cross-cultural communication has revealed serious weaknesses in current assumptions on mutual comprehension between Western and non-Western peoples. Aid has been found to be debilitating in its impact, especially when it is realized that almost all aid and development projects assume target communities to be passive recipients having no cultural presuppositions of their own. Vulnerable Christian mission following Biblical models of social, economic and political powerlessness are advocated as the way forward for Westerners concerned to promote global Christianity, peace and well being. More specifically that is – that there be some missionaries from the West working in the 'poor world' using the languages of the locality in which they work and only local funds to support the ministry in which they are engaged. These are the two principles being promoted by the Alliance for Vulnerable Mission.

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Personal Biography

The present author (b. 1964) has been a missionary in Zambia, and then Kenya since 1988. Sent by a Baptist church in England, seconded to Kima International School of Theology of the Church of God in East Africa, he also works with a lot of indigenous churches primarily in Bible teaching. He is fluent in *Kiswahili* and *Dholuo* (of Kenya) as well as English and German (and at one time *Kikaonde* of Zambia).