

# Worldview: A Vulnerable Mission Ingredient

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## Abstract

I offer three illustrations for each of three aspects of worldview: values, beliefs and emotions. A culture's concept of worldview affects the whole culture. Thus, a practitioner of vulnerable mission must learn not merely a culture's worldview but the whole culture, including the local language, in order to adapt life and ministry to local realities. Although the rationale for vulnerable mission is often based on pragmatic grounds, I offer one drawn from the example of Christ. That rationale is reflected in AVM's new purpose statement.

My first year at a Bible College in Russia was one of my most difficult and discouraging times in ministry. As that academic year progressed, I found it increasingly difficult to get out of bed in the morning, and still harder to go to class and teach. Student behavior in class went from bad to worse – and my students were adults, ranging in age from their mid-20's to their 40's! The director of the college and academic dean were quite sure my poor teaching was the source of the problem.

Nine months earlier (in December 2001) those same students received me very well when I taught a two-week intensive course. The academic dean was sufficiently impressed with me to invite me to join the faculty. I felt his invitation was motivated in part by how the students responded to me and by my prior missionary service in Uganda and then Ukraine.

That positive reception in December 2001 left me completely unprepared for the very negative reaction and increasingly poor behavior of those same students in class a few weeks into my first term in the fall of 2002. I examined myself and my teaching both in style and substance and couldn't see how I was the problem. All the same, I was acutely aware that I was the only foreign faculty member. All the other teachers were Russians.

One evening during that first academic year, my wife and I had two teachers from the college over for dinner. Both were ethnic Russians. When we finished eating, we three teachers moved to the living room to continue talking, while my wife stayed in the kitchen – *all done according to Russian custom*. One teacher asked me which class of the three classes or years of students gave me the most trouble. When I indicated the same students I referred to above, both men said it was the same for them. Then one of the them gave the reason why that was happening: the *student collective didn't form properly*. As soon as he said it, I realized it was true. I doubt I would ever have come up with that explanation on my own, but based on what I knew about Russian culture, his observation made perfect sense.

To American ears, *collective* is often understood as a political term, associated with communism. I am using *collective* or collectivism as it is used in cultural anthropology.<sup>1</sup> The existence and functioning of collectives is deep in Russian culture and history. People working in a factory spontaneously form themselves into a collective; workers in offices do the same thing; children in elementary school and later in university automatically form themselves into collectives. Nobody tells them to form a collective; it's the natural thing to do. Russian Bolsheviks didn't invent the idea or the practice. They made use of a pre-existing Russian cultural reality: If you're Russian, how could you *not* form yourselves into a collective?

One function of a Russian collective is to discipline the people in it. The prevailing cultural assumption is that an individual is not responsible to discipline himself. Discipline is the responsibility of the group. Imposing discipline is also not the responsibility of the head of the collective, but is the responsibility of the *whole collective*.

Therefore, the student collective as a whole was to blame for the misbehavior of individual students. Neither individual students nor teachers were to blame for students' bad behavior. The student collective just was not doing its job.

This story illustrates one aspect of worldview, which cultural anthropologists call *values*. Cultural insiders use the fundamental values of their culture to help them assess life choices, whether to do things this way or that way. Geert Hofstede, for example, created a continuum or scale of Individualism and Collectivism. The higher the score, the more individualistic a national culture is taken to be. The lower the score the more collectivistic a national culture is taken to be. Hofstede ("Country Comparison," n.d.) gives the U.S. a score of 91 and Russia scores a 39. Although in 2002 I was still ignorant of Hofstede's work, I was quite familiar with how collectivistic assumptions in Uganda and Ukraine influenced everyday living and ministry decisions, in comparison with my own individualistic assumptions. I was fully aware of the strong, collectivistic element in Russian culture.

Russian culture has a clear "strong group" orientation, whereas the U.S. has a clear "weak group" orientation. That preference for a "strong group" showed itself when a Russian teacher held a malformed student collective responsible for the misbehavior of individual students at a Russian Bible College. Our American preference for individual responsibility or a "weak group" orientation showed itself when I examined my own behavior, implicitly assuming I was somehow to blame for the misbehavior of individual Russian students. Yet, although I had adequate theoretical cultural knowledge, I just did not connect my knowledge to my situation. I needed someone to help me understand why things were going wrong in the classroom. When those Russian teachers connected the dots for me, things fell into place and I understood the situation more from an insider's point of view, instead of my natural, outsider's point of view.

In retrospect, those Russian teachers acted in grace towards me when they pointed out that the student collective was malformed. They probably knew the college administration was blaming me for students' misbehavior. And the Russian teachers guessed correctly that I would understand their explanation. Their act of grace made the situation easier for me to bear.

Now let me jump ahead to connect these thoughts briefly to vulnerable mission. Then I'll fill out the concept of worldview, ending with more on vulnerable mission.

### **Vulnerable Mission (Part 1)**

The practice of vulnerable mission necessitates, in part, a mental shift *from* the worldview implicitly known and naturally lived out by a missionary *to* the worldview of another people group. To learn the worldview of another people, *and* live according to their foreign-to-you worldview, leads to living uncomfortably just about all the time.

A rough synonym of vulnerable is weak. Trying to shift one's thinking and acting to the worldview assumptions of another people group is, in my experience, done in fear and trembling, not in confidence and strength. You become vulnerable to the possibility of doing it wrong even when you're trying to get it right, and being corrected as though you're a child. The practice of vulnerable mission just about requires a missionary to live in weakness.

To better understand the thinking and feeling of a cultural other requires not merely imagining what it feels like, but actually standing in the circumstances in which the cultural other lives. You need experiential knowledge in addition to head knowledge. Real experiential knowledge comes from living with similar stresses and strains, similar obligations, similar limitations, and similar rewards typically experienced by cultural others. It means leaving behind the safety that your relative wealth, social status and power may give you. Seeking to live according to the worldview of cultural others will make you vulnerable to all sorts of things, as they are vulnerable. The Alliance for Vulnerable Mission ("Purpose Statement," 2017) says in part that missionaries seeking to practice vulnerable mission ". . . should share as fully as possible in the life circumstances, language and culture of the particular group of human beings to which God calls them . . ."

### **Worldview**

I began by illustrating a culture's fundamental values, using individualism and collectivism as examples. A society can function reasonably well using either a collectivistic or individualistic starting point, because values are *social* constructs. Neither collectivism nor individualism – nor any other possible values – are an inherent part of how God made the universe and human beings. Values are real in the sense that a society implicitly agrees to live according to them.

Beliefs, a second aspect of worldview, express what a society understands to be really real, whether or not an individual accepts a particular belief as true. Consider these beliefs about the source of success. Some who live in South Asia believe that reincarnation is real, that is, part of the physical and spiritual form of the world. If an individual is experiencing success in this life, it is regarded as a kind of reward for right living in a past life. Being poor in this life is a kind of punishment for bad living in a *past* life. Present success is not dependent on one's own efforts in this present life, but on one's right living in prior lives. Current success and failure grow out of the structure of reality. That's a cultural belief in South Asia. It doesn't square with Scripture, but it is their view of reality.

A quite different cultural belief about the nature of reality was demonstrated by commencement speakers at my niece's graduation from university last year. One commencement speaker was an Egyptian man who graduated from that very university 30 or 40 years ago. He had become very wealthy, highly regarded in his country, having an excellent international reputation in his field. He pointed out that all the graduates had to overcome obstacles to get to graduation day. If they would remember in years to come, he said, those foundational lessons of hard work and perseverance, there would be no limit to what each of them can do! The secret of success in life is to continue to work hard, just like they did during their college years.

Listening to him speak, I gradually began to think he may have converted to Western culture, perhaps as a result of his years at that university? He didn't sound to me like someone who came from a Muslim background, or even a Coptic one. Our American cultural belief in the source of success as stemming from hard work and perseverance has an empirical basis, *for some people in specific kinds of situations*. However, what that Egyptian man and other speakers said pointed to a belief in a mechanistic universe, in which if anyone does the right thing in the right way he is guaranteed of getting good things.

That American cultural belief in the above form of reality leaves out God as the One who blesses. It also leaves out a partial condition for receiving His blessings, that one must be faithful to Him. "You may say to yourself, 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.' "But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today" (Deut. 8:17-18, NIV). Notice that the ability of Israelites to produce wealth or become successful was also connected to a covenant between God and the Israelites' patriarchal ancestors. The universe is not as mechanistic as we Americans assume it to be.

A third aspect of worldview is feelings or emotions. In a chapel service at the Russian Bible College I mentioned earlier, the academic dean told of his recent trip to the States. He related that he visited a large church in Texas. After the service, an American woman came up to him to say how sorry she was that Russian Baptists sang such sad songs. She meant that Russian Christian music is often in a minor key.<sup>2</sup> The academic dean smiled and kept glancing at me as he repeated what the American woman said. More interesting was the reaction of students as soon as he said, "sad song": They erupted in laughter! The academic dean went on to say that the American woman didn't understand the Russian heart: To Russians music in a minor key wasn't sad but joyful, deeply moving in a way Americans couldn't understand. Many students in chapel voiced their agreement when the academic dean said that.

A small point I am making is that people of different cultural backgrounds may have different emotional reactions to the same music. A more significant point is that our emotional reactions to specific situations, events and ceremonies are learned behaviors.

Children of specific cultural backgrounds learn to associate a certain emotional tone with particular events, settings, etc. As a foreigner, a missionary might learn, for example, when to make the correct moves at the right time in a ceremony *and still get it all wrong*, if the emotional tone he conveys through his actions does not fit what local people of that culture expect. I learned, for example, that when a Ukrainian or Russian accepts Christ<sup>3</sup> other believers expect

that person to cry. Tears convey sadness for one's sins and a desire to turn from them to God. Failing to shed tears publicly in that setting sounds a false note to believers, implicitly communicating that the individual probably has not really repented. Tears constitute emotional proof that the person's repentance is real.

That reference to emotional proof points to a function of emotions in a culture's worldview. Paul Hiebert (*Transforming Worldviews*, 2008) calls emotions the glue that helps to hold together or reinforce worldview convictions. My emotional commitment to the beliefs and values of my culture is a kind of proof (to me) that what I believe and value is right and true. I know that what I believe and value is right and true because of how strongly I feel about my beliefs and values. In practice, one's feelings for a value or belief are inseparable from what is valued or believed.

I learned during our years in Ukraine and Russia to associate a deep joy with music in a minor key, an emotional reality that does not hinder me from feeling joy in an American context when I hear music in a major key.

## **Vulnerable Mission (Part 2)**

My illustrations of the three aspects of worldview touched on different spheres of life. In fact, learning the worldview of another culture will bring you into contact with all or nearly all spheres of life, that is, a whole culture. Thus, it is no exaggeration to say that the practice of vulnerable mission is inseparable from learning and adapting to the whole culture of another people group. Perhaps we may even say that vulnerable mission *is* learning and adapting life and ministry to the culture<sup>4</sup> of another people group.

Jim Harries has written extensively about the necessity of Westerners learning the local language of a people, and of the necessity of local believers depending on their own resources to sustain Christian ministries. I agree completely with what Jim has said on those topics.

So that communication by outsiders may be understood as well as possible by local people, outsiders need to learn to speak the local language well. Speaking a local language well also requires learning the local culture well. At the end of the day, language and culture cannot be separated, for they are parts of a whole. When it comes to establishing and sustaining any kind of Christian ministry in another people group, that ministry must fit *their* local context. In other words, if all a Westerner cares about is *establishing* a ministry and does not care if it *continues* in her absence, then it is not necessary to learn a local language and culture. But if an outsider wants a ministry to continue, to be sustained by local people more or less indefinitely, then it must fit their circumstances, assumptions about life, economic realities, power realities, social structure, etc.<sup>5</sup>

What I just offered was an incomplete summary of a pragmatic rationale for vulnerable mission. What Jim and others have done is, first, to observe what Western missionaries do and, second, observe the consequences or results of what they did. The medium- and longer-term consequences of what missionaries have done is often enough not pleasant for local people and God's purposes. Therefore, we need to change how we do things.

We Americans are a pragmatic people. Our pragmatic approach typically disdains theories and ideas of how things ought to be in favor of how things are. We care very much about results. In our orientation to time, we generally care more about the short term than the medium and long term. Might it be that when we combine our disdain for theories with our desire for results in the short term we unintentionally become more *expedient* than pragmatic? An expedient solution is done quickly and easily. An expedient solution may even be temporary, whereas a pragmatic solution *at least in theory* fits a specific situation, and is done in a reasonable and logical way. Some discovery of information about a specific situation and thought must surely precede a genuinely pragmatic solution. Is that really our practice? Or do we come with preconceived solutions and give little time if any to discovery of information about a particular situation before acting? How much time do we give to *thought* about various aspects – I am including local people as an aspect – of a situation before acting? Are we not a people in a hurry? Perhaps we tend to act more expediently than we realize? Might our solutions arrived at in very little time come unraveled just as quickly? If so, to what extent can we even consider them effective?

Now place what God did in the Incarnation against the backdrop of our American tendencies. Jesus spent about three decades growing up and working at an ordinary job before He began His public ministry. One supposes Jesus spent some of that time learning about Judean life and thinking about what He learned. That does not seem to be an efficient use of time and resources as we reckon efficiency. What God did does not appear to be particularly pragmatic, according to my American point of view.

A still deeper and more profound point remains to be made about the Incarnation. We know from Luke 1:35 that an angel told Mary that the Holy Spirit would come upon her to cause her to conceive. The One conceived in Mary was the Second Person of the Trinity joined to a human being. He was/is both Son of God and Son of David. Do you see that the Second Person of the Trinity did not incarnate Himself, that He depended on the Third Person of the Trinity to be incarnated? The Second Person of the Trinity did not use His *own* power to work that miracle but depended on the power of another Person of the Godhead.

Paul tells us in Phil. 2:7 that Jesus emptied Himself. Whatever may be the precise meaning and extent of that self-emptying, we can say with certainty that the Second Person of the Trinity remained fully divine after He took up residence in Mary's womb. He depended on God to bring about that marvelous change. The Fetus in Mary's womb was weak and vulnerable, as an ordinary fetus is weak and vulnerable. The Child born to Mary was weak, vulnerable and dependent, as an ordinary child is weak, vulnerable and dependent. Do you recall Who descended on Jesus at His baptism? Do you recall Who led Jesus into the wilderness after He was baptized? In the synagogue at Nazareth Jesus read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me . . ." (Luke 4:18). In Mark 5 a woman touched Jesus' cloak, seeking healing *and power went out of Him* (Mark 5:30). Who caused power to go out of Jesus to heal that woman?

God did not appear among us as an engaging politician, as a successful businessman, as a doctor with advanced medicines and procedures, or as a technologist. Jesus did not come as one who had enormous wealth and high social standing in the society of His time in Judea. God as Jesus had everything imaginable (including things we ourselves have not yet imagined) at His disposal

and chose nearly all the time to use only what was physically available around Him. By and large He laid aside His power and knowledge, but not His wisdom. While retaining His character or nature or identity, He chose weakness, humility, vulnerability and foolishness (as we reckon foolishness) as the way to achieve His purposes. Then in humility He allowed His own Crucifixion (Phil. 2:8).

One application of that story is expressed in these words: “Your attitude should be the same as Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5). The first recipients of Paul’s letter, the saints of the Philippian Church, were supposed to have the same attitude as Jesus. By extension, all believers of all times and places, of all ethnicities, of all social standings, should have that same attitude. I suggest Phil. 2:5-8 applies to cross-cultural servants, also. Although we Americans often think of attitudes as purely mental realities, the attitude of Jesus led Him to act in concrete ways towards other humans and towards the Father. Those concrete actions led Him to be weak, mortal, and vulnerable to ordinary life in Judea.

Is this really what God wants for all His people, including cross-cultural servants? “For the message of the **cross** is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the **power** of God” (1 Cor. 1:18, NIV). The Cross was, first, a physical demonstration of the weakness of Jesus and, second, a prelude to the demonstration of the power of God. Follow me, Paul said, as I follow Christ (1 Cor. 11:1). When I am weak, Paul said, then I am strong (1 Cor. 12:10).

Michael Gorman’s (*Cruciformity*, 2001) words are helpful:

One might accuse Paul here of finding a theological rationale for his personal failures or lack of certain skills. Even if that is partially true, for Paul what matters is that *his* weakness allows *God’s* [emphases original] power to be manifested. Cruciform power means that no one can attribute the effects of Paul’s preaching and teaching to successful marketing techniques – ancient or modern – but only to the inherent power of the cross as the revelation of God (p. 283).

Therefore, the Alliance for Vulnerable Mission (“Purpose Statement,” 2017) encourages “. . . cross-cultural workers to follow the humble example of Jesus, who demonstrated His vulnerability in part by living like the Jews of His time and place.”

Was the Triune God being expedient, pragmatic, idealistic, theoretical, or unrealistic when He acted in Christ through the Incarnation? Did He take a short-, medium- or long-term view of things when He acted in Christ? Was God at all concerned with results when He acted as He did? Or, was He so concerned about long-term results that He ignored short-term consequences?

Vulnerable mission asks us to follow the example of Jesus in cross-cultural ministry. Above I pointed to Jesus as One who laid aside the power, for example, that was rightly His and chose dependence on God. Here I turn to His life and ministry skills and tasks. He learned a local language and culture. From Joseph He learned how to work with wood and stone. From those three decades of ordinary living He came to understand a local people well enough to speak and act in ways they understood. When challenged, He answered well and wisely, demonstrating His

understanding of Scripture and God. When angry, He did not call down fire from heaven to destroy those buying and selling in the temple, but used local materials to construct a whip to drive out the money changers. He depended on the monetary gifts of others to sustain Himself and the 12, instead of using His divine power to withdraw funds from the Celestial Bank of the New Jerusalem.

Vulnerable mission calls us to live a humble life that begins with the sometimes humiliating experience of learning another language and culture. That understanding may lead to living and serving in surprising ways. It includes not holding onto the high social status that Westerners may unknowingly possess in the eyes of local people. It means not depending on resources God has not given local believers.

Despite everything that happened to Jesus, following that pattern worked out very well for Him. It can also work out well for us.

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<sup>1</sup> The literature on collectivism is extensive. Harry Triandis is a foundational name identified with collectivistic ideas. Geert Hofstede in his books and website (<https://www.hofstede-insights.com/models/national-culture/>) made collectivism more widely known through his Dimensions of National Culture.

<sup>2</sup> If you're unsure of the difference between major and minor keys in music, listen to what the Musical U Team (August 24, 2016) produced, "Hearing the Difference between Major and Minor Keys," Retrieved from <https://www.musical-u.com/learn/major-minor-keys/>

<sup>3</sup> Russian evangelicals say a person has "repented" instead of "accepted Christ."

<sup>4</sup> I'm using culture in this sentence in the sense of the whole way of life of another people. That way of life necessarily includes their language.

<sup>5</sup> This paragraph goes well beyond worldview. Following is a list of cultural elements, adapted from a class I took from Dr. Charles Kraft at Fuller Theological Seminary in 1984. The order of the items in the list has no significance. Jim Harries has emphasized the use of local resources, which is largely part of Economic Organization. Colonial history and missions history in East Africa are enormously important in understanding the contemporary East African scene. Both of those are included in Cultural and Societal History, and Future Trends. Although worldview is listed separately, in fact it shapes the assumptions and practices of every item in the list.

*Therefore, a practitioner of vulnerable mission of necessity will interact with every and all items in the list.*

1. Physical Setting & Material Culture
2. Legal system
3. The Arts: Music, Painting, Architecture, etc.
4. Political Organization
5. Entertainment or Play: Sports, Hobbies, etc.
6. Kinship and Family/Marriage System
7. Non-Kinship Groups
8. Educational System
9. Worldview
10. Health Care/Healing
11. News Media/Information Dissemination

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12. Rate of Cultural Change
  13. Economic Organization
  14. Kind of Culture: Peasant, Urban, etc.
  15. Cultural and Societal History, and Future Trends
  16. Local Language

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