



ALLIANCE FOR VULNERABLE MISSION

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Alliance for Vulnerable Mission Bulletin

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Editor: Jim Harries, PhD, Chairman of the AVM



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The Alliance for Vulnerable Mission encourages some missionaries from the West to engage in their ministries using local languages and resources.

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Advance Conference Notice: 2021.

The next UK-AVM conference is to be held at All Nations Christian College, Hertfordshire, 12th to 15th September 2021. Details forthcoming.

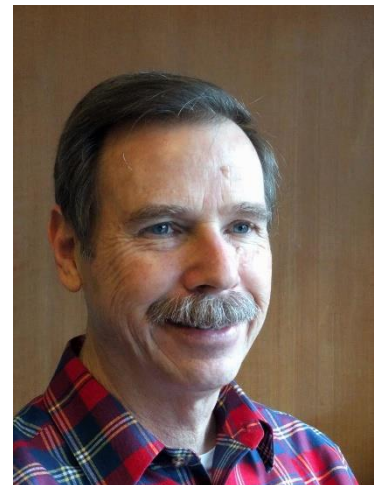
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- This article by Fred Lewis, vulnerable mission supporter: ['Friendship and Identification on Multicultural Fields'](#) is published in *globalmissiology.org*, July 2020.

Fred's abstract reads: "American missionaries assume that friendship is the relational basis of a multicultural field (MCF). Field is preferable to team because the metaphor of team privileges an American conception of the group above how field members from the Global South may conceive of it. Given the inherent diversity of a MCF, it is unlikely the individual identities and interests of U.S.-

Americans will overlap extensively with the collective identities and interests of MCF members from the Global South, making identification problematic. Identification is possible through application of the Social Identity Approach (SIA): All field members share a common social identity as believers."



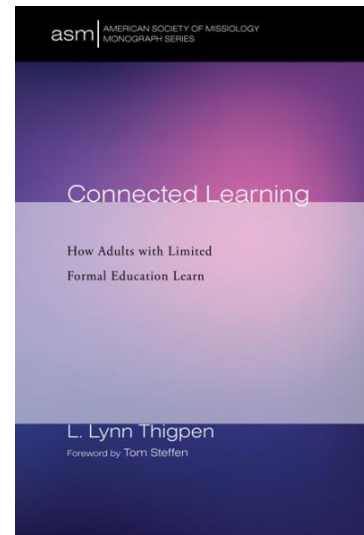


- [Enlightenment liberalism is losing ground in the debate about race: a new ideology is emerging](#) says the economist. This amazing confession seems to offer hope to the Gospel ...

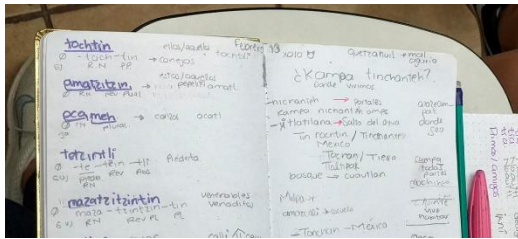
[Connected Learning: How Adults with Limited Formal Education Learn,](#)

by friend of the Alliance for Vulnerable Mission Lynn Thigpen.

Endorsement by Jean Johnson: “As one who lived in Cambodia for sixteen years, I am thankful for Lynn Thigpen’s gleanings via entering the world of Cambodian adult learners. I am convinced that her research plays an important role in helping foreigners put the cross-cultural work back on their own shoulders, rather than unknowingly crushing the dignity of the local people by converting them to one’s own seemingly sacred learning models.”



A translation of some of Jim’s work on the covid-19 pandemic, translated into German, has been published in *Evangelische Missiologie*. The title is: [Warum Massnahmen zur Bekämpfung der Pandemie ohne Kenntnis des kulturellen Kontexts nicht weiterhelfen](#)



[Educate children in their mother tongue, urges UN rights expert](#)

The Special Rapporteur [said](#) that: “Education in a minority’s mother tongue, combined with quality teaching of the

official language, is more cost-effective in the long term; reduces dropout rates; leads to noticeably better academic results, particularly for girls; improves levels of literacy and fluency in both the mother tongue and the official or majority language; and leads to greater family and community involvement.”



- This article by Jim Harries, [‘Overcoming “Domination”: A Vulnerable Approach to Inter-cultural Mission and Translation in Africa’](#) is published in *globalmissiology.org* July 2020

Abstract: “This article considers how the African mission field can be a level playing field for Westerners and locals. Mission presenting of the gospel must be contextually appropriate. Choice of language is a part of

this. Use of English as global language today is different from use of Greek in New Testament times. This article shows how terms can travel between cultures with or without their ‘cultural roots’. Local cultural characteristics, such as the prominence of witchcraft in much of Africa, should not be ignored. Africa in the 1970s called for a moratorium on Western mission. This article considers the implications of this not having happened. Western education is found to create an ‘island’ of knowledge in Africa. Vulnerable mission is proposed as the way forward, keeping Western missionaries on the ground.”

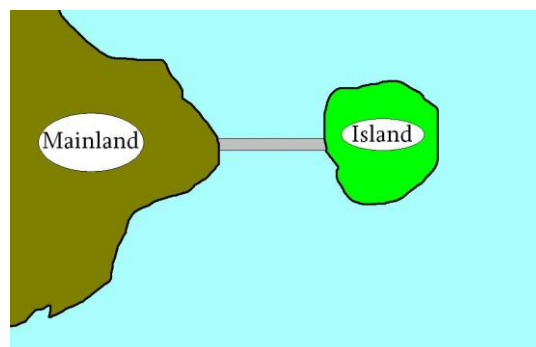


Figure 4: Depiction of an Island of Knowledge

Covid-19: The West as 'Laughing Stock' in Africa.

Jim Harries

Posted on academia.edu here:

http://www.academia.edu/attachments/63968561/download_file?s=portfolio

Introduction

My entitling this piece 'the laughing stock' is not an act of joviality. But I often ask myself, now more than ever, 'Do Westerners realise how they can appear in Africa?'

I don't want to say the wrong thing in the wrong way. I do not want to belittle anyone. Least of all conscientious people from Europe and America who come to Africa to help us. Sometimes though, in a crisis, I think, a spade needs to be called a spade.

Confused and restrained reactions¹ in Africa to the West around strategies for dealing with covid-19 are not surprising new kinds of development. They follow the same pattern as have responses to other Western interventions. For example, much of the way the global community has insisted on locking-down having (largely of necessity) been ignored by the poor in Africa illustrates ways in which Africa has to discount in practice a lot of 'good-sense' coming from the West.² Do Westerners realise, I ask myself, how people see them, when

¹ Reactions are likely to be restrained through fear that revealing Africa's misunderstandings will risk either loss of funds or loss of trust regarding one's ability to handle those funds in ways considered appropriate by the West.

² Why has it been difficult not to take account of it? 1. Because many people get their daily sustenance on the back of earnings acquired as a result of doing work on the very day. 2. African people like to live together. Any one rebelling against the requirements of 'being together' can easily come to be considered a witch. Hence the Swahili say: "*apendaye upweke ni mchawi*". That is, "he who likes to spend time by him- (or her-, the Swahili does not specify) self may well be plotting on how to harm other people." Here we should be perceiving a firm foundation for people's reluctance to self-isolate! (Center for African Studies nd). Something else concerning

time after time they have advice to offer which they consider to be true and important, yet local people don't understand what they are driving at, and/or cannot implement what they are being advised to do? Unfortunately, once one has a reputation for saying 'foolish things' one may never be taken seriously again, but for one's money. This is sadly a predicament the West faces in Africa today.

Basically, in my experience, African people love Westerners more than other people groups from around the world. That much need not be in serious doubt. They also value what the West has historically had to offer—like modern education. The problem, or a problem, arises from contemporary relations. African people are so used to hearing things that demonstrate limited local understanding spouted by contemporary Westerners, that they no longer know what to take seriously, when, or how.³

What makes covid-19 into an especially sharp issue is the way it is currently killing thousands, including people in wealthy Western countries. In another sense though, as an example of how Western countries tell others what to do, there is little unusual happening: advice given is emphasised as if vital and important, but that advice gets little real traction when it meets contexts for which it is not designed.

Problems arising from the dominance of globalised communication, from the media and 'global' scholarship, are rarely taken sufficiently seriously. To consider English a global language has in a sense been a misnomer. More accurately, English is a language of a powerful and beloved people that has been globally adopted: People in Africa amongst other places, value Westerners' unique awareness of ethnocentrism and genuine concern for others who may be totally unrelated to them.⁴ Africa's adopting European languages represents a willingness to benefit from what the West has to offer. This applies despite what the West offers not making sense to indigenous worldviews.⁵ In this way, it represents willing-subservience, and acceptance that even a miscomprehending paternal hand of the

the above: people mix with those of other households when searching for firewood, water, vegetables, and even toilets and bathrooms. All these resources are commonly shared by more than one household.

³ What I mention above arises from my own experience. Visitors from Western countries are habitually received to Africa with much grace and respect. (The fact that they are likely to be offering access to serious wealth is not immaterial to this welcome.) Hosts must however also be careful, as the visitor is likely to say things that make little sense to the local context and could be destructive in their outworking, a tendency that often results in church splits following foreigners' visits.

⁴ I particularly appreciate Girard's observation on the unique awareness of ethnocentrism found in the Christian West (Girard 1992).

⁵ Hence a major reason why African people struggle to innovate in Western knowledge systems without undermining them, and why the West continues to be the fount of 'good' education decades into the 21st century.

West can be kinder than the brotherly embrace of a neighbour. The West needs to realise more profoundly that in contemporary global engagements it is accepting a dominant role for itself. Its language, its institutions, its science, its scholarship, its culture, are everywhere dominant. Accepting this is accepting responsibility for what one is doing. Such responsibility must not be shirked in a crisis. If Africa has agreed to be the client of the West, then from their understanding, the West must always be there to take a lead in their crises. The West's not 'realising' this implied responsibility may be causing it to not take its role sufficiently seriously, so falling short of the expectations of African people. A particular way in which it falls short is, I suggest, in its failure to understand African populations 'at depth'.

African people's love of the West has long been tempered by a resistance to the direct governance of Westerners. This was profoundly expressed in the independence movements of the 1950s and 1960s. It continues today, for example with the stringent visa requirements for Western people wanting to take up long-term residence in African countries.⁶ It reflects a deep understanding, notwithstanding appreciation, to the effect that Western people do not easily get a sufficient grasp of Africa to successfully engage direct policy implementation. I believe that here is a large important red flag.

I want in this article to examine four areas in which I believe the West needs to act extremely quickly in order to facilitate good communication with today's Africa surrounding the current coronavirus crisis.⁷ First, it needs to pay urgent attention to the ontological turn. Second, it needs to come back to the issue of race and racism. Third, questions of theology and religion require urgent attention. Fourth, I raise the need for the practice of vulnerable mission. Urgent attention to these issues could relieve the flaw identified in this article of thoughtful advocacy by the West being too little attuned to indigenous cultural realities to be taken sufficiently seriously, resulting in the risk of communication from the West being a 'laughing stock'. By making the West a "laughing stock" I mean that Africans appear to accept the advice of Westerners despite the fact that they know the advice cannot be successfully enacted in their own contexts. In particular, the recommendation to lock down and maintain social distancing under the threat of covid 19 is not realistic. That would require a sort of individualism that comes most immediately from the West. (It can best be encouraged by the freedom found in conversion to Christ.)

⁶ It is my impression that this is becoming more difficult, and that many African countries are not looking to have White Westerners become citizens.

⁷ This article was written in April of 2020.

The Ontological Turn

“Proponents of anthropology’s recent ‘ontological turn’ . . . argue that . . . concern for differences in cultural perspective implies something else, with which they do not agree . . . that the things on which people have different perspectives are always and everywhere the same” (Heywood 2017, 1). The source of the above quote, draws particularly on Strathern’s observation on Hagen culture (in Papua New Guinea), that “our conception of nature as invariant matter to be cultivated by man, and culture as human elaboration upon that matter, does not exist” (Heywood 2017, 1). To cite Strathern herself: “notions of nature and culture [might] belong to a specific intellectual tradition within our own culture . . . there is no demarcated ‘nature’ or ‘culture’ in Hagen thought” (Strathern 1980, 176).

For Heywood, if the content of ‘nature’ itself varies, then the assumption that culture is something that diverse people build on a uniform substratum, is misguided. Implied in those supporting the ontological turn, is the accusation that anthropologists, amongst others, have erred in assuming that humans can grasp one another’s ‘cultures’ by transferring what they learn from ‘another’ to their own comprehension of the supposed ‘universal’ substratum.

The above presupposition of a common substratum, I suggest, underlies the ‘humility’ with which contemporary Westerners all too often engage the majority world. The need for listening and understanding and so forth is widely acknowledged, if one is going to work with a foreign people. The Westerner doing the ‘listening’ is, at the same time, typically convinced that ‘they are right’, so they are humbly waiting for a ‘native person’ to agree with them. One can compare such experience with two people standing together looking over a scene. One person sees five oranges on a tree. The other denies that there are any oranges on it. Instead of trying to find out how they can not see those oranges, the first person considers the second to be ignorant, although in today’s culture of political correctness does not say so. The ontological issue is that the second person assumes that oranges must be orange, an assumption not shared by the first person who has spotted 5 green oranges.

Another perhaps more graphic example: my picking up some soil and putting it into my pocket while walking through a farmer’s field in UK would probably not bat eyelids even should the owner of the land see me do it. In Africa, where part of someone’s life-force is thought to be in the soil of their land, such an action could easily be seen as demonstrating an intention to bewitch the farmer. Advocating the taking of samples from people’s fields, a simple recommendation in some parts of the world, becomes laughable if listeners know that the local population will interpret that as an intention to bewitch.

Sharing strategies on how to deal and cope with coronavirus by Westerners with people in Africa, when a substratum is not held in common, requires much more than epidemiological assumptions rooted in science. It requires ascertaining how that African community comprehends crises such as the one anticipated. That process of comprehension is unfortunately not as simple or easy to grasp as is discovering that oranges can be green: The alternative comprehension is such that *everything has changed*. This means that a discourse engaged in one *cultural and natural* context could have a totally different impact in another such. Simply trying to transfer the discourse, and saying 'adjust this to your context', is far from adequate.

Anti-racism⁸

Theoretically, anti-racism in the West is intended to ensure that people not be biased in how they respond to others who have a skin colour or other features of genetic origin associated with an ethnicity other than their own. It is to undo the 19th century belief that different races of people are genetically superior or inferior to one another (Young 1995, 45). In practice, opposition to racism has become a way of concealing truth, of concealing the nature of alternative cultures, on the basis of the assumption that secular culture is normative. (I here refer to North American anti-racism, widely interpreted as a need for a kind of colour-blindness, that has been globalised to a much greater extent than have alternative anti-racisms (Bonnett 2000, 17). This is widely seen in the kinds of behaviour that is considered racist: Racism that is condemned always contains the assumption that non-Westerners fall short of Western standards. It is never (or at least extremely rarely!) a condemnation of an assumption that Westerners fall short of, say, African standards.

For example, suggesting that: African people cannot learn to speak English properly = racist. American people cannot speak good Swahili = not racist. African people are not capable of mathematics = racist. American people are not capable of witchcraft = not racist. African people are not capable of monogamy = racist. American men cannot manage more than one wife at one time = not racist. African women don't know how to properly cook European food = racist. European women don't know how to properly cook African food = not racist. African men don't know how to love their wives = racist. White men don't know how to love

⁸ For more on the author's views on antiracism see Harries (seeking publication).

their wives = not racist. Kenyan people have a lower average IQ than Scottish people = racist. Welsh people have a lower average IQ than English people = not racist.

Western style anti-racism aims to universalise secular norms. To take someone of a particular ethnicity to be less capable of behaving in a 'secular' way is racist. It is not racist to take Western people as falling short of norms practiced by non-Western people that are not associated with secularism, such as those listed in the paragraph above. Anti-racism therefore acts as a blind that occludes any features of non-Western people that are not 'secular' from view.

This latter feature of anti-racism has resulted in a level of ill-preparedness on the side of the West's engaging with or leading the rest of the world in the battle against covid-19. Self-imposed taboos by the West, such as its particular form of anti-racism, which are largely unknown in Africa (African people living in Africa may be largely or totally unaware of how self-restrictive anti-racism is for Westerners), are such that they are intentionally occluding aspects of what is going on in Africa.⁹ Some of what is being occluded are cultural responses to anti-covid-19 prescriptions that are problematic.

In criticising Western anti-racism I am not advocating for racism. I am advocating for reflexivity, such as that articulated in the Australian perspective of Kowal, Franklin and Paradies (2011). "There is a need to avoid essentialising minorities as 'good' and essentialising white people as 'bad'," they suggest (2011, 325). In mixed company, they point out, one must counter the "desire to [simply] agree with any Indigenous person present" (2011, 329). More specifically, my concern would be that we not allow our anti-racism to be internationalised. That is, treating someone of a different race as if they are 'one of us' when 'us' represents the dominant culture (e.g. respecting Black people in the USA as genuine Americans) should not be internationalised to expecting Black people to be 'like Americans' when they are in Africa.

There is little point in my explaining more of what it is that the West is missing unless my reader is at this point ready to accept that they have been hoodwinked by anti-racism. On face value, I will most likely just be digging a hole for myself. My point though is simple: The avoidance of perception of truth that has arisen from decades of practice of anti-racism in the West leaves the West ill-prepared to engage with the 'cultural-face' of crises such as that of covid-19 in African contexts. Should Western readers deny my allegations about

⁹ There is obviously a problem here regarding potential peer-reviewers and readers of this article, who are likely to be Westerners, and will not appreciate and quite likely not agree that they are as ignorant as I am making out! The only thing that might deter such critics of my work from preventing it going to publication, is appreciation of the lengths I have gone to in making myself vulnerable to African community(s) over 32 years. For this reason, I really have to consider myself to be addressing Western academia from beyond its normative confines.

ways in which anti-racism has hoodwinked them, then my arguments, for them, run aground. But minimally I have here pinpointed a misfit that I suggest is contributing to a lack of credibility for the West which in this article I am identifying as being a 'laughing stock'.

Theology, Individualism, and Covid-19

Our discussion on the 'ontological turn' above suggests that "nature" may not be a fixed substratum that can be assumed universal to all cultures. In my examination of anti-racism, above, I articulate ways in which secularism has become an assumed universal, ignoring its particular historical, theological roots. I here want to extend my purview to take a deeper look at ways in which the West has presupposed the universality of theological positions that are actually contingent. Such incorrect presupposition of universality by the West implies that theological 'work' that needs to be done has already been accomplished. In short, it assumes Africa to be 'post-Christian'.¹⁰ With respect to the overall thrust of this article, such incorrect assumption contributes to indigenous people habitually taking directives from the West with a pinch of salt.

Allow me to use a case-study of what is apparently the current situation in Iraq regarding covid-19, as articulated by an article in the *New York Times* (Mashal and Hassan 2020). This article gives different reasons why it is difficult to implement advice designed in the West on how to overcome covid-19. Although in some ways different from East Africa, many parallels apply, especially a likely contemporary reluctance in Kenya to being tested for covid-19, fearing that, should one be discovered to be sick, one might end up having to quarantine oneself at a location chosen by government which lacks facilities, under police guard, and then be asked to pay all the bill (Otsialo 2020). Why has quarantine, something people are expected to do to themselves in Europe and America, become a feared imposed experience in Iraq and in parts of East Africa?¹¹

¹⁰ I.e. to once have been Christian, and to be still benefitting from its Christian history, even if it contemporarily denies the source of the benefit—the position of parts of the West.

¹¹ "Isolation separates sick people with a contagious disease from people who are not sick. Quarantine separates and restricts the movement of people who were exposed to a contagious disease to see if they become sick" (CDC 2020). Advice from the USA: "You might be asked to practice self-quarantine if you have recently returned from traveling to a part of the country or the world where COVID-19 is spreading rapidly, or if you have knowingly been exposed to an infected person" (Maragakis 2020).

I would like to consider this concern in terms of *individualism*. Individualism is often considered a characteristic of the West. It is widely considered an undesirable characteristic, presumably because the term seems to imply 'care about myself rather than about others.' This raises the question: If individualism is undesirable, and the West is individualistic, then why is it the West continues to be considered a global leader? I suggest that individualism in the West has become a setting free from cultural 'taboos' that remain intact in other parts of the world. The latter taboos 'force' people into collectivity, sometimes known as 'community'.¹² Community, in Western English, is considered a good thing. It being a good thing implies that taboos that generate community are positive or admirable. This assumption of admirability, however, I suggest, ignores the fact that taboos which hold people together may not actually result in their having a genuine deep concern for one another. If the coherence of African community is based on fear and not, say, love, as is implied by Kroesbergen (2019, 173-176), then this may in some ways be an unhealthy community. I suggest that the West's admiring 'community' in Africa results in false presuppositions of its integrity which, being inaccurate, misread Africa. Such misreading contributes to misfit of advocated-for policies. Such misfit also adds to the frustration of African people over the lack of understanding of the West and contributes to the possibility of considering them a 'laughing stock,' by listening to but not following their advice.

Because non-individualism is associated with non-White races, pointing to it has attracted accusation of racism. Hence negatives of collective (taboo-based) life-styles are frequently ignored. These negatives may include deep reluctance to function as an 'individual'. Such reluctance makes any suggestion that separating someone out for 'isolation' due to infection by covid-19 is positive appear abhorrent. If Iraqi and Kenyan people fear that submitting to medical rules could result in shameful conditions such as enforced self-isolation, they may prefer to suffer or even die while excluded from whatever minimal formal health services are available (Odhiambo 2020, Ogila 2020).

I want to ask a question at this point. Let us imagine that the examples of Kenya and Iraq represent what is 'normal'. How then did citizens of Western countries come to be individualistic? Individualism imparts certain strengths. For example, it can enable people to value themselves independently of affirmation from their colleagues or family. It can result in a certain not-caring attitude regarding how or where they will be buried. 'Individuals' can continue to be faithful in following a course of action even should no others share their conviction that it is good, right, or the best course to follow. As a result of this, the troubles someone goes through can be taken as a means to benefit the wider community, resulting

¹² See Kronenfeld (1975) for how, from at least the 1970s, Western academia has often found Africans to be particularly oriented to community.

in people rejoicing, or being patient, even in the midst of trials. It can result, presumably, in people having faith in scientific answers to health problems, as social-relationships are no longer considered causal when sickness occurs. They can accept that someone might 'isolate' themselves and work doggedly on a problem in the communal best interests, with little thought for personal gain. Hence that a researcher can state 'truth' as it exists, even if it is not in personal self-interest to do so. (For example, if the results of a scientific experiment conducted are contrary to one's favourite theory!) This is how individualism in science can be an appropriate foundation to bring benefit to people's lives in a community! Someone may be ready to put up with mockery on the basis of a conviction that their discovery will bring a great deal of benefit to many people in the future.

It is clear to me, that the ability to stand apart from community has roots in the Gospel of Jesus. Jesus, the hero of Christian believers, acquiesced to being thrown aside by his friends and even family—few if any of the people in these categories seemed to stand by him at the point of crucifixion. That rejection, we believe, was a part of how he saved the world! The first man in Siaya, Kenya, to die with covid-19 was ignominiously buried at night—something extremely shameful for the whole family. The Bible does not elaborate in any detail on how to take care of dead bodies.¹³ Biblical heroes were courageous to face difficult circumstances including being despised by their colleagues. Jesus is an example of such. As is John the Baptist and Paul the Apostle. (Both John and Paul spent a lot of time in prisons. Christians did not consider that, because they were so heavily persecuted, they could not be respected as men of God!) Moses was alone when he met with God on Mount Horeb (Exodus 19:3-25), Elijah when fed by a raven (1 Kings 17:2-16), and so on. Yet, we are periodically told, that what defines African value is *Ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* is 'be together'. It gives little room for someone to separate themselves out in order to acquire blessing!¹⁴ There is little expectation in *ubuntu*, that someone who rejects the group to function alone will subsequently be able to benefit the collective.¹⁵ It would be very difficult in this kind of

¹³ There are a few instances, such as Abraham acquiring a place for his family burials (Genesis 23:1-20), Jezebel being eaten by dogs (2 Kings 9:10), digging up of bones of a king and burning them being condemned (Amos 2:1), but generally the emphasis on respect for the dead is much different than in other ANE documentation of biblical times. There is a "difficult relationship between the requirements of monotheism and the traditional cult of the dead" (Bradbury and Philip 2016, 309).

¹⁴ "*Apendaye upweke ni mchawi*," says a Swahili proverb. This could be translated as 'he who likes to be alone is busy killing other people.' No wonder, yet again, that people don't want to 'self-isolate'! (Center for African Studies nd).

¹⁵ I am not denying that going to pray alone can be valued in Africa. This may be a practice that is collectively-appreciated. I consider the examples I mention above to be other than this. Moses' going up the mountain alone had people fear. Elijah was alone as a result of rejection. John and Paul's being imprisoned was as a result of standing up to the collective view, in contemporary terms, standing up to *ubuntu*.

situation to respect someone like a lone-scientist who shut himself or herself away so as to work on something that at the time no-one else understood or valued. Yet, such orientation is esteemed in Western culture. People in the West are happy to give their lives into the hands of science and to accept that purveyors of science can be honest and dependable.

In short what I am saying is that the means developed in the West to fight covid-19 builds on and presupposes that everyone globally has benefitted profoundly from the teaching and guidance of the Western church. This means that a prerequisite, at least in African terms and apparently also with respect to Iraq, to WHO (World Health Organisation) strategies being able to work as intended, is that people they are intended for, have certain aspects of the Western-Christian worldview, especially those relating to individualism and the willingness to part ways with community taboos. The saving of human lives by WHO hinges on people having a worldview that can be credited to evangelism and conversion to Christianity.

I concede that the above theological summary is short and concise, so for the sake of brevity does not take account of all eventualities. It leaves open questions on Eastern Christianity, on indigenous African Christianity, and so on. It assumes that Western Protestant Christianity is today's pinnacle of religious devotion. While I accept that these issues could do with a lot more unpacking, I believe my main point stands, as even such 'unpacking' would be a thoroughly biblical, theological, and 'religious' exercise.

As a result of what I have outlined in this section, a major key requirement for coping with covid-19 being ignored, is the need for faith in Christ. Reasons for ignoring it are related to the West's attempts at presupposing the universality of their own secularism, today's anti-racism, and their desire to find 'good' in majority-world-collectivism. This kind of occlusion of truth, by leaving massive gaps in understanding of the other, results in anti-covid-19 strategies that fail to see how people's lives are controlled by 'unhealthy' taboos and thus contribute to making Western strategies a laughing stock. Strategies to counter covid-19 of this nature potentially raise rather than reduce levels of morbidity and mortality.

Vulnerable Mission

The AVM (Alliance for Vulnerable Mission), "to date the only academic and professional group of thinkers and practitioners who both research the theoretical underpinnings of vulnerability in mission and have strived to incorporate these principles in their praxis of mission" (Hof 2016, 188) has since 2007 been advocating a strategy of intercultural

engagement that can reveal people's 'deep cultures,' including practice of taboos mentioned above. Two principles that need to be taken very seriously by intercultural workers are that of using indigenous (and not European) languages top to bottom in what one is doing, and that of not backing what one is doing with outside financial resources.¹⁶

The use of indigenous languages (instead of Western languages) keeps people the Westerner is working with within the sphere of their own competence. It also keeps the outsider on a learning curve by enabling the outsider to hear what people are saying that arises from their own worldview. Use of a Western language like English easily results in a Western worker assuming a content to words (the category suggested by a word) to be the same as the one familiar 'back-at-home'. It incorporates what the 'foreign' people are doing as if it is a part of the larger Western worldview. Using people's own language, on the contrary, in due course reveals boundaries to their thinking. For example, it can reveal the total absence of modern 'scientific' content in traditional thinking, thus marking a boundary to traditional thinking with respect to the full field of play (if I use the analogy whereby the extent of a language is represented by the field of play in a game like soccer) used by Western theorists. It can also mark boundaries the other way, by revealing extensions of the pitch of play to territory that is either taboo or unheard of in Western thinking, for example the prominence and impact of fear of witchcraft in traditional African society. Thus a 'vulnerable' person from the West is able to grasp and interact with people without presupposing what they do not know, and while making allowance for what they do know that the West has not grasped.

Even in the West, but it is my impression much more so in much of Africa, a person with money is one with whom one should agree. The well-known saying 'don't bite the hand that feeds you' epitomises this. Much of today's intercultural communication between the 'rich' and the 'poor' world has ignored this. Hence, for example, nationals of poor countries are often used by concerned Westerners as sources of information on what is happening in those contexts. This ignores firstly how the person concerned has come to be familiar with English, and how their success at achieving credibility with Western people has probably arisen as a result of their portraying things in such a way as to please Westerners. Referring to my above analysis of individualism, we need to remember that to many people around the world, relationship is more important than 'honesty', so telling things that are 'objectively' true but would hamper good relationship is considered unhelpful (even 'immature') behaviour. The damper this puts on Westerners' discovering of on the ground realities is rarely given enough attention. The alternative is for a Westerner working in the

¹⁶ See vulnerablemission.org

majority world to consistently, quite likely over decades, refuse to use financial resources from outside to acquire, or to turn people into, yes-men.

Had the above principles been adopted by intercultural workers (missionaries, anthropologists, development workers and so on), today's shocks as to how quickly non-Westerners can succumb to covid-19 and how ineffective strategies designed in the West to counter covid-19 can be could have been easily forecast. Instead of trying to force people into what they cannot do (for example lock-down in slum contexts in Africa (Weston 2020) or in cities in India (Ellis-Petersen 2020)), helpful pragmatic strategies that can work in the light of extant contexts could have been advocated for the tackling of covid-19 from the beginning. Instead, to date, advocates for strategies of tackling covid-19 (powerful Western people and Western bodies) already having become 'the laughing stock' in Africa, have lost some valuable credibility. Irrevocable damage has already been done to non-Western communities.

Illustrative Examples of How Western Interventions can be 'Laughable'

If it were easy to point to details of just which 'mistakes' Westerners are making in Africa, and how deleterious their impact is, this would more often be done and all corrections would long ago have been made. It is difficult to outline specific examples, exactly because they draw on insights that outsiders to Africa, for some of the reasons given above such as their determination not to be racist, do not have and even do not want to have. Indigenous people who hope to benefit from donor-naivety similarly often do not want people to have such insights. I give two illustrative examples:¹⁷

An agriculturally progressive friend of mine was recently offered help by a foreign donor who noticed his capabilities. While it was his own sweat that had resulted in his success, fellow villagers respectfully did not interfere with his crops. Once they realised that he was building on donor funds neighbours began stealing from him.

Relations between pastors of the various churches of one denomination in Tanzania were amicable before the project started. Then, a project to help orphan children began. In due course someone told the Westerner providing the money that a pastor he supposed to be

¹⁷ These examples are 'true', but details have been changed so that actual participants not be recognizable.

reliable and so had made responsible for covering orphan children's school fees, was misappropriating funds. For purposes of accountability, the Westerner felt he had no option but to transfer leadership from that pastor to another pastor. That action resulted in great pain and much mutual accusation. The two pastors were estranged. This estrangement contributed to the death of one of them, and now the other has left the denomination.

Frequent incidences like the above are hardly 'funny.' Knowing how these kinds of things happen makes it difficult to take new interventions seriously, regardless of the apparent sincerity of the outsider standing behind them. Project interventions become a game, of endeavouring to acquire foreign money while minimising collateral damage. Damage done can often not be minimised. The apparently sincere and typically well-meaning foreigner can, behind his back, become a laughing stock.

Conclusion

This article discusses communication difficulties between the West and Africa. Miscommunication is shown all too often to make a mockery of good intentions, turning the West into a kind of laughing stock. Yet the West, by accepting and subsidizing the use of its languages and development projects, including health related ones throughout the African continent, and through a long tradition of benevolence, has implicitly taken on a responsibility for the continent which it should not shirk but must much more carefully consider.

This article considers four areas in which responsible action by the West is required. First, a realization that the substratum for understanding what the West communicates being often absent in Africa means that simply asking African people to 'adapt' what the West is doing to their own contexts, is woefully inadequate. Second, the West needs, urgently, to realize that its own practice of anti-racism has been a means of blind-folding itself to many realities that other 'ethnicities' live with. This having hamstrung Western scholarship for decades throws a question on much contemporary accepted inter-cultural wisdom. Thirdly, if we were to look carefully at the strength of Western nations by comparison with that of others, we would find that it arose as a result of having a long history of dedication to the Gospel. All this seems clearly to demonstrate the value, as prerequisite for counter-covid-19 strategies to work, for mass evangelism to bring non-Western people to faith in Christ. Fourthly, interventionary practices considered to be 'vulnerable' are an essential foundation for effective research and partnerships with African nations and people in countering the covid-19 scourge.

While many of the above may seem to be long-term strategies, I advocate in this article that extremely urgent efforts (given the rapidity of the acceleration of covid-19) be undertaken to as far as possible implement them quickly in evaluations of counters to covid-19 in Africa and other parts of the majority world.

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