



ALLIANCE FOR VULNERABLE MISSION

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**Alliance for Vulnerable Mission Bulletin  
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**Volume 12, Number 7.**

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, 12<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> September 2021. Details forthcoming.

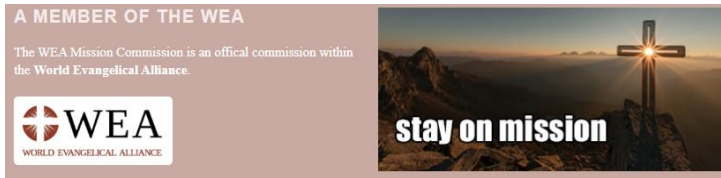
- ['Cashpoint aid' and Africa: Who benefits?](#)

Who benefits from cash for Africa? See this BBC article discussing recent moves by the UK Prime Minister by BBC Africa correspondent Andrew Harding.



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- Listen to this podcast (text also available) from the new (this year) Director of the Mission Commission of the

World Evangelical Alliance Jay Matenga – that slants towards vulnerable mission:

### MISSIONS IN A COVID CRISIS: PODCAST-DIVERSITY

- Jim Harries has just had an article published in *English as an International Language Journal*, entitled “[Is English salvific? Myth-busting ‘God’s language’](#)”

Harries, Jim, 2020, ‘Is English salvific? Myth-busting “God’s language”’, 1-16 in: *English as an International Language Journal*, 15(1), 2020.

The summary was produced by the editor of the journal reads: “Jim Harries’s paper entitled ‘Is English salvific? Myth-busting God’s language’, sets the tenor and tone for this issue. The paper attempts a bold problematization of key issues and insights that resonate with the prevalence and patronage of World English (WE) alongside the fixation with native speaker English. In light of this, the author’s professional Christian theological background and his intercultural understanding accrued over thirty years of living and working in Zambia and Kenya assume particular dynamism and immediacy in the paper. Debunking and contesting the current incontrovertible “salvific status” of native-speaker English as its standard version, ...”



- A short reflection on recent restrictions imposed as a response to covid-19 shared by Miguel, serving in Paraguay, entitled **Collateral damage:**

In the indigenous community nivaçle Fischat, where I live, we already had 6 deaths during the time of quarantine. No! - none for COVID 19, thank God! But every death causes feelings and pain. And the nivaçle will show it very openly, especially at the time of burial,

while are usually rather reserved in expressing their emotions.

Moreover, each death evokes gestures of solidarity. Since very soon they



usually bury their dead quickly, everyone knows what to do: wrap the body in its sheet and bulge it with its mattress; gather its goods (to bury them next to the body); dig the grave; perform the prayer; call the "ele" (priest). Inevitably, there is crowding of people; even more so at the funeral itself, which takes place as soon as the young people have finished digging the hole.

I'm trying to explain to them that no more than 10 people should get together. Just once, only 10 arrived with the body in the van; but soon more came. I don't have the heart to send them home. I'm wearing my mouthpiece. Just once I got five others to bring it too. Keep social distance? How?

I restraint myself not to shake hands, even less to pat or hug the closer relatives. But, it hurts. And the worst thing: I sense (or imagine?) that people feel: "That's how white people are: they reject us; they are disgusted with us!"

We have fought so hard to show our closeness, our love...

I remember, how some nivaçle told me in surprise, "white people don't usually share with us", when I asked them to pass me their tereré (a beverage cup shared in groups) too. All that is now impossible, forbidden, bad. I'm so sorry! How can we lose in a few weeks what we've built up over the years? I feel very uncomfortable, in front of this social distancing...

Miguel Fritz OMI

### Here is Miguel Fritz' biography

I was born 1955 in the North of Germany and grew up in its center, in a village, where we were a small catholic minority. Whatever to happen, we had to commit ourselves, very often accompanying our pastor, when visiting the even smaller neighbor villages. Sometimes, I was the only catholic in my class, so, often I had to explain to my companions, how we are and what we do. As a result, I ended wanting to become a priest myself. As I couldn't finish my secondary studies at home, I got the chance to stay in a student's residence of the Missionaries Oblates of Mary Immaculate. And decided to join them, with the idea to become a missionary in a foreign country. But then, studying, I learned so much about the reality in my own country that I remained and started, after my ordination (1981) to work in a miners' parish. During those years, I learned about basic communities and theology of liberation in Latin America and wanted to know this other face of Church. So, I asked for a 5 years immersion experience in Paraguay, which I was granted.

After 2 years with Guaraní speaking (Paraguay is the only country in Latin America, where an indigenous language became one of two official ones, beside Spanish) campesinos; I was asked to change into the Chaco (largest dry jungle of the world, where ½ of the sparse population were indigenous), but under the condition to stay at least for 7 more years, because I had to learn another language: Nivaçle. I accepted – and forgot about 5 or 7 years, especially as I had the chance to study anthropology and so really understand and love more those totally different cultures.

With the interruption of 4 years in the capital, because I was elected provincial (superior) of my congregation, and 6 years in Rome (as General counselor), here I am, living in the Nivaçle mission Fischat, a grace, because here I can practice again the language; and even teach it to my fellow-brother, who shares our pastoral work.

- Anthropologist Johannes Merz' recent article helps missionaries better understand how to apply honor/shame thinking in their ministry. In



*Picture from academia.edu*

doing so, Merz has come out strongly in favour of vulnerability in mission, actually using the term vulnerable itself 3x in his article. See:

Merz, Johannes, 2020, **'The Culture Problem: how the honor/shame issue got the wrong end of the anthropological stick.'** *Missiology: an international review*, 48(2), 127-141.

Merz explains that while it is not *wrong* to perceive a prominence of honor/shame in other cultures, it is misguided to think that learning about such an idea in English will enable a better functional understanding of 'real people' in all the complexity of their historical, linguistic and contextual worldview. To understand people deeply so as to minister in the light of complex issues like honor/shame requires long term vulnerable interrelationship with those people.

The submitted version of this article is available here:

[https://www.academia.edu/43235571/The Culture Problem How the Honor Shame Issue Got the Wrong End of the Anthropological Stick](https://www.academia.edu/43235571/The_Culture_Problem_How_the_Honor_Shame_Issue_Got_the_Wrong_End_of_the_Anthropological_Stick)

- A testimony about vulnerable mission, originally published in Global Link produced by Converge International Ministries.<sup>1</sup>



## **Vulnerable Mission facilitates multiplication**

by Brad and Deb Mashburn

We dream of an indigenous gospel movement that is “at home” in local culture, and we aspire to avoid any impediments to that worthy vision. We pray for an indigenous church planting movement that is self-sustaining, self-supporting, self-reproducing, self-theologizing and self-governing.

COVID-19 restrictions have given us time to read, pray, think and discuss how we should engage people in our new ministry location. In our previous missionary context, small and unintended missteps encouraged unhealthy dependence on our imported capacities and resources and made it difficult to discern the few seeking spiritual truth from the many seeking primarily material help.

Our exploration has led us to consider a ministry philosophy called Vulnerable Mission (VM). VM’s foundational principle is simply: Some missionaries carry out their primary ministry using only local language(s) and resources.

### Some advantages of Vulnerable Mission:

Avoids the role of missionary power broker with jobs, education, aid, etc. to dole out. These “fringe benefits” occupy a missionary with the many seeking this world’s “goods” and make it much more difficult to “see” the few God is calling to himself.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://converge.org/>

Allows more honest and open relationships with nationals — who are reluctant to disagree with a Westerner with benefits to distribute.

Gives missionaries key insights into culture and worldview as they hear and speak the local language.

Allows national believers to more quickly and easily replicate gospel strategies and ideas modeled by the missionary.

Encourages national Christians to trust God to envision and empower them to reach their own people and to sufficiently resource their vision via assets of local origin.

Our growing convictions:

Hearts and minds transformed by the Holy Spirit and a solid biblical worldview excel as the most enduring “development strategies” one can offer a needy world.

Low-profile ministry as “behind the scenes” coaches encourages and empowers local leaders.

The vast majority of workers and resources needed for a gospel movement are in the harvest field itself.

Local ministry initiative and ownership must come from local vision — which can only be fully realized with local resources.

Missionaries are vulnerable when we struggle to learn a local language and begin to think like local people.

Missionaries are vulnerable when relying more on God’s Word and Spirit and less on imported financial resources and connections. “For when I am weak, then I am strong,” Paul (2 Cor. 12:10).

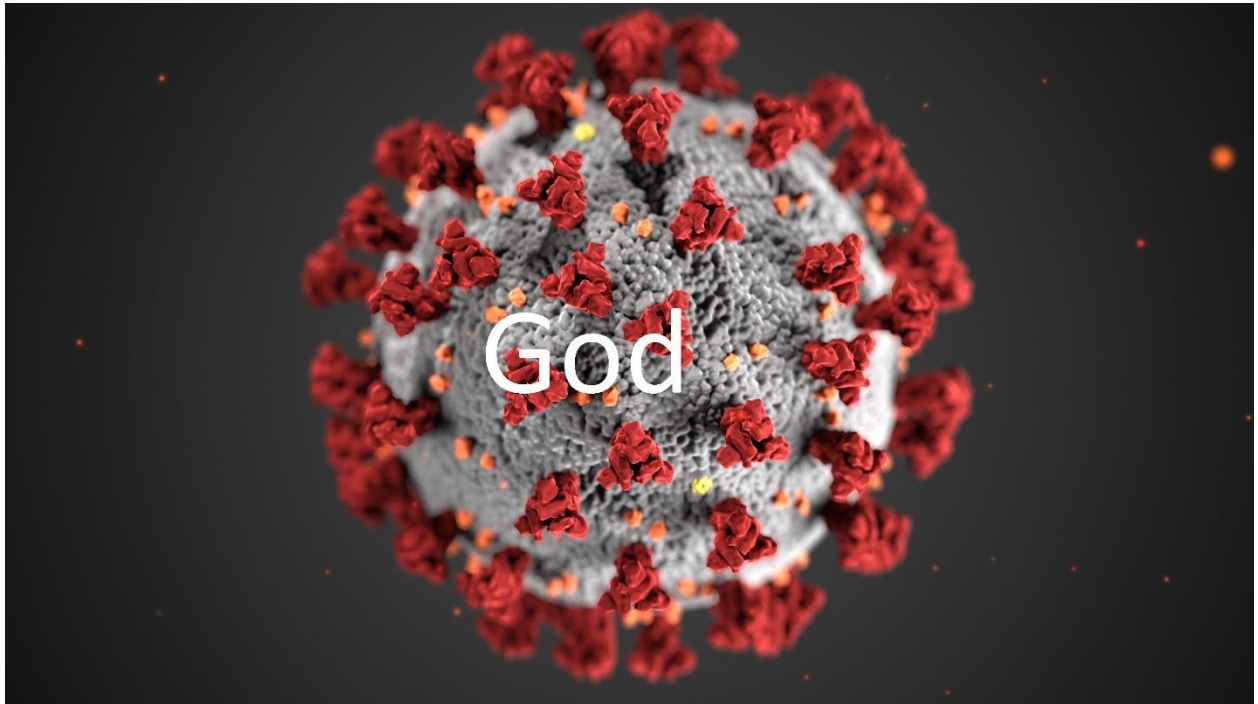
This is not a call for every missionary to take a VM approach. VM missionaries will likely need outside support for their own living expenses, but their primary ministry will be done in a local language and only with local resources.

We believe Vulnerable Mission is an approach that should be considered by more missionaries. For more on VM: [vulnerablemission.org](http://vulnerablemission.org); [jimharries.academia.edu](http://jimharries.academia.edu); [jim-mission.org.uk](http://jim-mission.org.uk)

## **Covid-19 in Africa: God in a Virus**

By Jim Harries, Academia.ed session from May 8<sup>th</sup> 2020

**Bio.** Jim Harries, PhD, lives and ministers amongst indigenous churches in western Kenya. He remains in Kenya through the covid-19 crisis.



Many comments I receive from Christian leaders in the West pertaining to today's crisis are about how the church is committed to following government recommendations on containment of the pathogen.<sup>2</sup> I see little more profound comment on the theological implications of the covid-19 outbreak. This can probably be explained by a general trend by which churches in the West are 'on retreat,' confining their activities to private pastoral roles and voluntary associations.

Not so in parts of Africa known to me! Certainly not so in Tanzania, where churches are remaining open throughout the crisis. Even when churches may not be open, they continue to play a key role in responses to the crisis, at least in East African countries. It seems clear to me that the same applies throughout the continent. I want to ask here: how does that work? What is the role of the church, of theology, of God, in addressing the covid-19 crisis today?

I have recently engaged in pastoral-visiting to members of local indigenous churches. With my mouth and nose covered throughout by a mask,

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QY44A6Flhkl>



maintaining a 2-metre distance, all visits are conducted out of doors only. I have felt a powerful sense of relief from those we visit. They are overjoyed to find the church, from which they had been forcibly (geographically) excluded to be active and concerned for them. Local pastors I accompany are also overjoyed to be reconnected with flock-members in this way. One doesn't have to go to church though, or to be in 'church circles' to hear God mentioned by people in this East African community. His name is, rather, it seems, constantly on people's lips. Whatever else covid-19 may or may not be: it is definitely something to do with God. In Africa, covid-19 and the disease it causes are highly theological.<sup>3</sup> I ask: does God wither as he travels north across the Mediterranean?

I detect a reluctance to moralise coronavirus-caused disease in the West.<sup>4</sup> Is covid-19 God's punishing sin? Western Christians aren't sure. They probably don't think covid-19 comes from the devil either. Isn't it clear – it comes from China? African people are less hesitant to ascribe it to the devil.

Theologically speaking, covid-19 can be seen as a 'breath of fresh air' in Africa. Allow me to explain: Prosperity Gospel tends to hold enormous sway in African Christianity. Covid-19 has given this a knock. It can open the door to understanding a Gospel of suffering. Has God allowed covid-19 to encourage humankind to turn-around and change their ways?<sup>5</sup> Yes, definitely, I should say.

I am aware that, when it comes to matters about God, many Western peoples are practicing voluntary self-obfuscation. Despite a total lack of evidence regarding his supposed absence, they refuse to take any account of God's role in formal activities.<sup>6</sup> This formal-reluctance, that I take as being a residue of

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<sup>3</sup> See also: Harries, Jim, 2020, 'Why African people see God as in control: Covid-19 Response. Report from within today's Africa. April 8th 2020.' In: *Alliance for Vulnerable Mission Bulletin*, 12(5), May 2020.

<sup>4</sup> I often find the reluctance amongst Westerners (evangelicals?) to consider any disease or calamity as being a punishment for sin to be striking. I think I understand why they do it, to indicate the universality of God's love. At the same time, it seems to excuse things that are clearly sinful. A classic example is HIV – which in the vast majority of cases in Africa I understand is spread by extra-marital sexual activity. While mis-identification of God's punishment may be wrong, to not realise when he is punishing sinners, may be just as misled.

<sup>5</sup> The word I have in mind here is *metanoia* in Greek, i.e. to repent.

<sup>6</sup> One cannot ever find evidence for God's absence, as he may always be where one is not looking, and his presence can be effective in a way with which one is not familiar.

defunct positivism,<sup>7</sup> is tightly held, in the light of a widely believed myth, that God (understood as ‘religion’) is responsible for violence.<sup>8</sup> That myth is unknown to African communities with which I am familiar.

The little-recognised to-date ‘block’ on sense I find to be anti-racism. Levels of implicit racism in Western society continue to necessitate strong emphases on anti-racism. With reference to our debate here: Africans believe in God. Africans should not be taken as genetically inferior to Westerners (according to anti-racism). The way they believe in God clearly shows, in the eyes of many Westerners, that they are indeed inferior (according to defunct positivism – that refuses to completely die and that produces atheism in the West, and Westerners’ inflated self-opinion). To say so though is racist. Racism is heavily proscribed in the West! Westerners conclude that Africans obviously are inferior, but daren’t say so. This leaves a large body of stigmatised thought hanging in an ether – implicitly held but carefully not-expressed. I suggest that this is what has resulted in contemporary becalmed winds around theology: Theological sailing ships are immobilised by fear they would provoke issues contrary to anti-racist agendas.<sup>9</sup> So, anti-racism renders theology dead in the water.

This situation, I suggest, is built on confusing two categories, that of culture and that of genetics: Anti-racism that endeavours to counter partiality based on genes, results in a blocking-from-view of cultures different from what is Western. This gives the misleading impression that Western secularism is universal to humankind.

I want to look at 10 areas of enormous theological significance pertaining to today’s coronavirus pandemic. I suggest that many differences between Black and White people are not ‘racial’ at all, but better understood as cultural.

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<sup>7</sup> [https://www.academia.edu/30995313/What\\_is\\_wrong\\_with\\_Positivism](https://www.academia.edu/30995313/What_is_wrong_with_Positivism)

<sup>8</sup> The debates I allude to here: What is religion? Does religion cause violence? Is faith in God responsible for aggression and war? are dealt with elsewhere. (Cavanaugh, William T., 2009. *The Myth of Religious Violence: secular ideology and the roots of modern conflict*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.) In short, I suggest, indeed, a ‘wrong’ view of God can lead to violence, which is why engaging theology (discussing who God is) is so important in contemporary society.

<sup>9</sup> Kowal comments that anti-racists in Australia fear the stigma associated with their perception of the failings of prior generations of activists who have worked with indigenous people on the basis of overt theological beliefs. (Kowal, Emma, 2015, *Trapped in the Gap: doing good in indigenous Australia*. Oxford: Berghan.)

Hence African belief in God does not arise from ‘inferior’ genetic origins, so does not have to be cordoned-off through fear of accusation of racism.

Ten theological explanations:

### 1. Secularism is a Whopping Lie!

I have pointed out above, that secularism’s main protagonist is anti-racism. Put anti-racism aside, and secularism ceases to be an obvious truth.<sup>10</sup> My own acute awareness of this comes from decades of close exposure to indigenous African ways of life. African populations having been left out of key historical developments that have affected Europe do represent something of ‘what European people were once like.’ Putting aside anti-racism and seeing African people for who they are, in the light of the Gospel, reveals clear mechanisms by which the West has become what it is today. The Gospel’s massive formative role in the history of the West reveals limitations to the claims of secularism. Side-lining secularism opens the door to faith in God.

### 2. Suffering for Others

The theology of dominant counters to covid-19, like voluntary self-isolation and quarantine, is in the West profoundly rooted in notions of personal sacrifice for the collective good. Those notions are deeply entrenched in Christian teaching, Christ himself, who voluntarily gave his life in a gruesome shameful death to save the world, being the prime case to be looked up to.<sup>11</sup>

### 3. Jesus, the antidote to fear

Globally, increasingly, Jesus’ example backed by the whole biblical record, is number one antidote to fear. Throughout Africa, where-ever Muslims don’t come out in violent opposition, this is how Jesus is proclaimed. Once so proclaimed and accepted, evidence of the impact of the message is everywhere observable by numerous gatherings of believers, many of which erect buildings large and small to commemorate, advertise, and facilitate spreading of the hope they have found. The West also is full of churches, plus has hundreds of millions of believers and adherents and followers of Christ. Official policies in Western nations that want to ignore all this, in the name of secularism, are denying important areas of truth.

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<sup>10</sup> I make this point in depth in a book that is currently submitted to a publisher.

<sup>11</sup> As indicated above, my stating thus is due in part at least to my understanding that this notion is largely absent in traditional Africa. I do not consider that stating such makes me a racist. Rather, doing so is recognising the work of the Gospel.

#### 4. Step one in countering covid-19 – close churches!

Many people I meet here in Kenya are incredulous that step-one by our government, was to prohibit Christian gatherings. The refusal to do so by neighbouring country Tanzania is as noticeable by contrast. Why was this done? I suggest because churches form the fabric of African community. Did implementation of secular counters to the disease based on science that remain formally dominant, require first shutting the mouth of Christian sense?

#### 5. Role of Medical Doctors

I was incredulous, when a British medical doctor told me, that his main role in the covid-19 crisis has been ‘encouraging (frightened) people’. Medical practitioners go through many years of intense bio-medical training. Yet – that makes sense! British people who have heeded to secularism, absorbing terrifying predictions given to them by politicians and media, need solace. Outcome: the front-line practitioners of biomedicine, the GP, supposedly the bastion of bio-counter-disease strategy, have to take the role of Priests!

#### 6. Why should I care if someone else dies?

The question I put to head this section may seem ‘harsh’. Yet I think the question is important; why do we care? Secular historians who try to project such caring back into ancient times stand on air: individual lives of people to whom one was not related and on whom one was not dependent were once never so valued as they are today. They certainly weren’t so valued in traditional Africa. The reason ‘we’ care about any life being lost to any disease, I suggest, is because – uniquely and consistently – the Bible stands with victims, basically all victims, and wants us to do the same.<sup>12</sup>

#### 7. There aren’t ‘world-religions’!

Contemporary research, Western thinking and logic, modern society, all subscribe to a myth necessary for their legitimacy, that there are ‘world religions’. Once upon a time in European history, Christianity was considered universal truth. People with questionable motives dissatisfied with that scenario searched for an alternative, and by dubious means well outlined by

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<sup>12</sup> Rene Girard is renowned for his observation that a unique aspect of the Bible by comparison with contemporary literature of its time, is its concern for victims. Girard, René, 2001, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 178-181.

Masuzawa<sup>13</sup> (see also my own work that draws on Masuzawa<sup>14</sup>) usurped God's role for Western man.<sup>15</sup> Faith in 'world-religions,' that seeks to relativize God, a degenerative myth built on sand, needs to be swept away by today's crisis, revealing that God is, God is one, God is powerful, yet he has a heart of caring for all of mankind.

8. 'To not get sick – do an act of kindness'

Researchers of all kinds have been working overtime on the wave of coronavirus-fears. Despite an apparent domination of bio-medical commentators in the media, others have got their foot in the door of publicity. 'Expressing kindness to someone else raises resistance to disease pathogens,' says expert Sonja Lyubomirsky (Professor of Psychology). Students of Jesus have been saying such things for a long time, but because Christianity is considered 'a religion' – had to be ignored.

9. Reversing accusations against Imagery in 2 Samuel 24.

Events described in 2 Samuel 24 (in the Bible) strongly parallel today's coronavirus disaster. The account tells us of an angel bringing death to 70,000 people, until God told him to stop.<sup>16</sup> Some incredulous moderns consider such an account to be a 'fable,' because of its drawing on images of 'supernatural' agents like angels, that clearly 'don't exist'. I wonder whether such critics are familiar with well-known authors like Lakoff and Johnson, who pour cold-water on notions that human language may be objective?<sup>17</sup> Human calamities are frequently imagined and therefore accurately depicted as having human causes. (Certainly, that's the case in Africa, where disasters are typically blamed on witches.) This has little to do with *supernatural*. Obliging God to confine himself to our invented modern categories, like 'must be supernatural

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<sup>13</sup> Trying to expunge Christian influence over science and secularism is, for Masuzawa, like trying to "round up sundry types of crypto-theology scurrying in the tribunal of science," (Masuzawa, Tomoko, 2005, *The Invention of World Religions: how European universalism was preserved in the language of pluralism*. London: University of Chicago Press.)

<sup>14</sup> Harries, Jim, 2016, 'Shadow-boxing: the missionary encounter with Christian theology in world religions', *The Pneuma Review, Journal of Ministry Resources and Theology for Pentecostal and Charismatic Ministries & Leaders* <http://pneumareview.com/shadow-boxing-the-missionary-encounter-with-christian-theology-in-world-religions/>

<sup>15</sup> Ogunnaiké, Oludamini, 2016, 'From Heathen to sub-human: a genealogy of the influence of the decline of religion on the rise of modern racism.' *Open Theology*, 2016, 2, 785-803.

<sup>16</sup> 2 Samuel 24:15-16.

<sup>17</sup> Lakoff, George, and Johnson, Mark, 1999, *Philosophy in the Flesh: the embodied mind and its challenge to western thought*. New York: Basic Books.

for me to take him seriously,' strikes me as a poorly founded critique of monotheism.<sup>18</sup> Our being told a Biblical story which refers to actions of an angel should not be cause for us to discredit what is being taught.

#### 10. The World looks to blessing from the West

The ability to self-critically consider its own ethnocentrism is a key to the uniqueness of the West.<sup>19</sup> No-one else around the globe does this as do Western Christians. (We should remember that the term 'the West' comes from the division of the church between West and East, that formally occurred in 1054. Particularly formative of today's West has perhaps been Protestant Christian faith.) The response to this is global affirmation! Strategies for overcoming covid-19 are currently sought in wisdom originated in the Western church,<sup>20</sup> now appropriated by Western societies (France, Germany, USA, UK, etc. etc.). The globe follows those who follow God's lead, thus fulfilling Biblical prophecy.<sup>21</sup>

### **Conclusion**

There is an enormous contrast in ways in which theology is drawn upon to tackle covid-19 in the West as against in Africa. In the West, it seems God's role is largely ignored. In Africa, it is high profile and given much credit. The excuse that too close an examination of African people could result in one being considered racist, is far from adequate reason not to attend to such massive difference. Other reasons drawn to our attention in this short article contribute to justification for a taking seriously of God's role in human community in general, and in pandemics like that of covid-19 in particular, by the West today. This article outlines 10 key areas of God's activity in today's crisis, that need to be acknowledged, declared, and responded to.

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<sup>18</sup> There is no mention of 'supernatural', i.e. no assumption that nature operates mechanically but that God is extra to that, in the Bible.

<sup>19</sup> Girard, Rene, 2014, *The One by whom Scandal Comes*. (Translated by M.B. DeBevoise.) East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 24.

<sup>20</sup> The enlightenment came to Western Christians.

<sup>21</sup> Genesis 12:2-3. See also Matthew 28:19-20.

## **Covid-19: Woeful Communication History Aggravates Coronavirus in Africa, June 2020.**

By Jim Harries,

Launched as session on academia.edu on 4<sup>th</sup> June 2020. (filename: covid June thoughts.doc)

I below briefly address particular issues that are especially pertinent in today's battle against covid-19 in Africa. The issues I address are not unique to covid-19. Interventions into Africa intended to counter covid-19 are in many ways an intensification of a pattern of activities engaged over decades that have come to be peppered with many failings and requiring profound attention.

### **1. The West doesn't know how Christian it is ...**

African colleagues in different parts of the continent often express surprise at how *Christianly* Westerners behave. That includes Westerners who deny being Christian! The West's being in denial about the Biblical roots of their traditions does not stop them behaving profoundly Christianly. As a way of countering 'racism', Westerners simply assume that others around the world, including in Africa, are much 'the same as them'.

The West itself fails to perceive how it has been formatively influenced by centuries of Christian belief. Westerners believe themselves to be just 'normal' and advocating what is 'obvious' to Africa.<sup>22</sup> Yet very often their proposals only make sense and could only work on the basis of the presupposition that there has been a centuries-long influence of a powerful church. This misguided belief 'trips up' advocated-for policies in much of sub-Saharan Africa. For example:

1. Strategies officially employed in Africa to counter covid-19 are designed by the WHO (World Health Organization) on the basis of Western wisdom. This wisdom assumes that people tell the truth, and believe that they are being told the truth. Members of societies traditionally guided by witchcraft (and ancestral traditions) may, on the contrary, believe that deception enables thriving. One deceives to 'dodge' witchcraft attacks. One assumes others are similarly defending

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<sup>22</sup> An example of this kind of 'obvious' thing is human rights, which to many Westerners are no-brainers, but actually originate in a long Christian history. Van de Poll, Evert, 2017, 'Protestantism and the Emergence of Human Rights.' *Theological Reflections: Euro-Asia Journal of Theology*, 18, 2017.

themselves. Such an expectation of deception is not inconsequential when anti-covid-19 strategies are received in the same light. The mind boggles on how to explain this more fully in a brief article ...

2. An underlying assumption that African populations are altruistic, i.e. ready to give or suffer on behalf of the other without compensation, is often simply unrealistic.<sup>23</sup> The presupposition that people are altruistic I suggest underlies many contemporary anti-covid-19 strategies.<sup>24</sup> Barclay explains that today's belief in altruism as found in the West is 'extra-Christian'!<sup>25</sup> That is to say, that Westerners get altruism from Christianity.<sup>26</sup> When responding to donors using English, many African people can portray themselves as being altruistic, yet their not actually being so perpetuates embezzlement of funds, and policies that favour the rich over the poor.

## **2. Language Issues Loom large**

From the preferred means of communication by a President of an African country to address his people, to the instructions on medicines, and all other formal contexts, Christianised, modernized, dualistic Western languages rule. Even when translation into African languages occurs, 'correct' interpretation of what has been translated pre-supposes a Western worldview, that is largely absent in Africa. The number of Europeans / Westerners who are competent at translating Western thought forms into African languages, or African thought-forms, is close to zero. Translation is left to not-altruistic (see above) wealthy educated Africans, who even if good at grammar and vocabulary rarely deeply grasp aspects of Western culture that underlie the way the West communicates. Delegating translation to others leaves donors themselves

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<sup>23</sup> The global perception of *Ubuntu* is sometimes of this ilk.

<sup>24</sup> My reference to altruism here is related to the 'tragedy of the commons'. See for example here: <https://www.britannica.com/science/tragedy-of-the-commons> For example, an individual or individual family would reap benefits by not complying with lock-down, yet if no one complied with lock-down, then it is assumed that the net loss in utility would result in everyone losing out.

<sup>25</sup> Barclay, John, 2018, 'Is Altruism a Christian Virtue? A New Testament perspective.' [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jlQ9UN\\_b4Zs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jlQ9UN_b4Zs) Firth Lectures, University of Nottingham, 2018.

<sup>26</sup> Altruism, the notion that one should give oneself in service to a non-deserving other, or to someone who cannot help themselves, is very much a Biblical value. The notion that true altruism expects zero return is however more recent. Biblical 'altruism', Barclay suggests (see footnote 2 above), does always expect some kind of return.



thoroughly in the dark, wondering why things aren't working as they thought they should.

The above-described linguistic ignorance of dominant partners in much African development, and now anti-covid-strategy, bodes extremely badly for the success of implemented tactics, which are inevitably guided by the West, where the money is coming from.

### **3. Eradication?**

The policies of Western countries with respect to countering coronavirus, that Africa can't help but imitate like it or not (with the notable exception perhaps of Magufuli President of Tanzania, who gets no end of flak as a result), lack transparency. Now as economies are opening up, distancing measures being emphasized all seem to be trying to delay an inevitable spread of the virus on the basis of a vague hope that a vaccine or miracle cure will emerge. It will be wonderful if it does. Realistically and on the basis of experience with other viruses, it may well not become available. Perhaps the aim in Europe is to eradicate the virus? If so, then this is not being made clear.

Inter-personal distancing strategies are vastly expensive! Billions have been expended to tide Western economies through lock-down. Lock-down itself has presupposed a certain kind of functioning economy, including a Christian foundation. It has presupposed, for example, that envy has been overcome. (I realise that Westerners may struggle to make sense of this theme of envy, which is exactly my point. Many Westerners, having lived all their lives in Christian / post-Christian contexts, have a low awareness of the damage to human societies wrought by envy. Many Western people do not even realise that the term for 'the impact of envy' that is widely used in Africa, witchcraft, is a product of envy.)<sup>27</sup> In simplified terms; it is difficult, often impossible, for people in a community dominated by efforts at countering envy to accumulate surpluses of food. Were they to do so, the envious would attack (i.e. bewitch) them. Instead, people buy the needs of a day on the day they need them. They often have to earn the money to use to purchase these things on the same day. That leaves little room for lockdown.

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<sup>27</sup> Harries, Jim. 2012. "Witchcraft, Envy, Development, and Christian Mission in Africa." *Missiology: An International Review* 40(2): 129–139.

Many African people's experience, backed by long tradition, tells them that misfortune (which would include illness and death as a result of a virus) arises due to either being bewitched by people envious of them, and / or as a result of breaking ancestral taboos. This is the basis on which contemporary ailments are understood, and dealt with. For example, certain African communities endeavour to counter HIV through ramping up their adherence to ancestral proscription.<sup>28</sup> That is how they will seek to counter infection by corona virus.<sup>29</sup>

#### **4. Foreign finance being part of the problem, cannot simply be a solution**

Outsiders to Africa do not seem to realise the power of their money. Giving advice is great (although, as pointed out above, advice should make sense in local contexts, which requires use of local languages with respect to such contexts). Giving advice, and then providing the funding to implement such advice, is however another matter. It is hard to see how the latter can be other-than trying to 'force' advice given. African leaders with educated populations who quickly become aware of the actions of the 'global community' are particularly likely to be criticized by their people for turning away freebies. Refusal of donor funds may well be taboo on principle. In many African contexts, one suspects that people have learned that instead of refusing funds, it is much wiser to accept funds even if tied to activities that one doesn't agree with or that don't make sense, then to use the funds in ways that do make local sense. Some call this corruption. Responsibility for such corruption should begin to be borne by donors who ignore the kinds of realities I have already mentioned above in preference to believing myths about African (and other majority world) levels of understanding and

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<sup>28</sup> I am here being intentionally vague so as to avoid falling foul of the condemnation of *generalisations*, an accusation often used by Westerners to maintain the hegemony of secularism. This book shares how to avoid getting sick and dying, according to traditional understanding of the Luo people of Kenya: Raringo, Jacktone Keya, no date, *Chike Jaduong e Dalane*, no publisher.

<sup>29</sup> News24, 2020, "'There's no corona!' - Denial a major obstacle in fight against coronavirus in DR Congo," News24.com, <https://www.news24.com/news24/Africa/News/theres-no-corona-denial-a-major-obstacle-in-fight-against-coronavirus-in-dr-congo-20200603?isapp=true>

(accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2020). Being in English and a published source, this account argues in the favour of the existence of corona, and by implication against the 'existence' of witchcraft, whereas for many Congolese, the truth is obviously the other way around.

development, in their reasoning on how to intervene. In short – faith-based-interventions rooted in faith in secularism.

Contemporary interventions backed by foreign finance such as the above underlying Western interventions into Africa typically preclude formal local initiative. Donor dependency coupled with efforts at donors seeking accountability for their funds, forces African people to appear to be doing one thing ‘formally’, even if they are doing another ‘actually’. The ‘actually’ always remains covert and at best semi-legal. This can effectively prevent it from *ever* receiving the kinds of attention that policy should get in democratic societies. The only way, it often seems, for African communities to begin to do things for themselves that make sense to them, would be to sidestep global systems, perhaps much as Magufuli<sup>30</sup> has recently done. That would be bound to attract massive criticism, from in and out of country.

## **5. Talking on the Level**

I would like to advocate that there be a place for inter-human engagement other than on the basis of sheer power. I can give an example of a sector that, albeit certainly imperfectly, exists in the West. Much education and research is in the West conducted by people who are paid salaries. This enables them to think freely and to rationally discuss and consider pertinent issues. Power-brokers, be they politicians or business people, subsequently draw on education and research to ploy their own craft. I advocate that African countries be encouraged to follow the same pattern. In today’s world, given a very dominant Western-led global community, such encouragement would be helped should Westerners themselves lead by example. I suggest Westerners demonstrate their advantage (gained as a result of a long Christian history) not only by telling other people what to do, but also by demonstrating its workability in non-Western contexts. There are two necessary prerequisites to doing the above:

1. Use the language of the people being reached, on the basis of a grasp of how the people themselves use that language.
2. Be in a position other than that of donor. This is to avoid having people tell you things so as to please you. Someone not identified as a donor

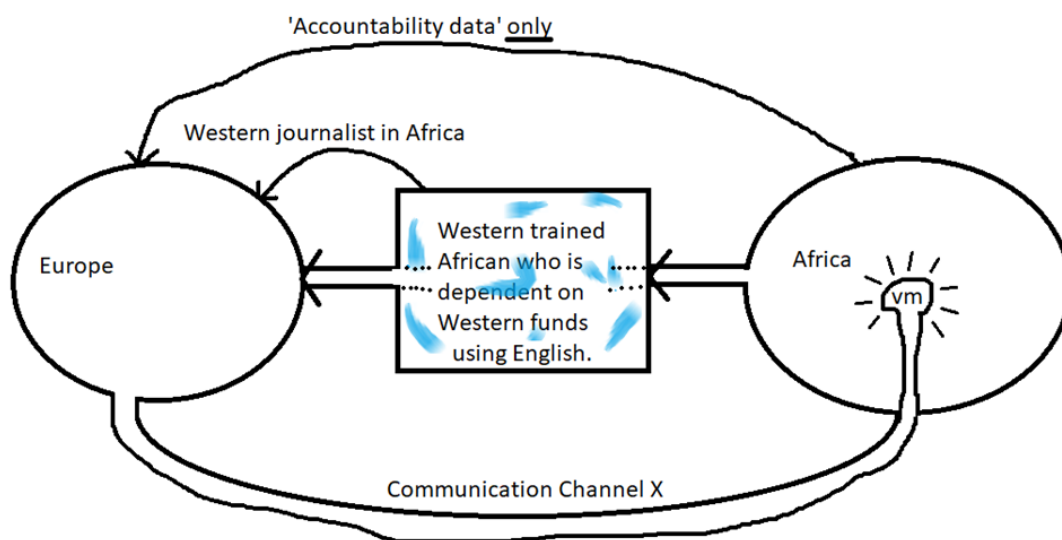
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<sup>30</sup> President of Tanzania.

can be enabled to share their thoughts without immediately being taken too seriously.

In practice, I believe the above requires a new model for working internationally. I refer to my advocating for such a model in another recent posting on covid-19: copies as Figure 1 below. The contemporary model for the West's intervening in the majority world is that Westerners with access to superior funds should articulate advice in their own languages. We need a new model, of Westerners without access to funds relating to a people using indigenous languages. This is illustrated in Figure 1 as 'communication channel x'. (The alternative channels of communication illustrated in Figure 1 depend almost exclusively on translation into English being done by non-native speakers of English.)

Figure 1<sup>31</sup>



## Conclusion

Today's dominant Western powers want to force us into a historical amnesia, to convince us that the global population is 'secular' just below the surface, so should simply be able to understand and apply directives on how to handle corona coming from the West. This is a continuation of the widely-applied model of communication with Africa – the West leads and Africa should

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<sup>31</sup> This Figure appears in: Harries, Jim, 2020, 'Covid-19 and the Historical Disregarding of Important Intercultural Communication Principles between the West and Africa,' 18-25 in *Alliance for Vulnerable Mission Bulletin*, 12(5), June 2020.

imitate. It is to ignore centuries of impact that the Gospel had on the West, it is to ignore that Africa never experienced the Renaissance, Reformation, or Enlightenment. It is to ignore the distorting effect of culture and translation on communication. It is to ignore that the West itself is struggling to know how to respond to corona. To think that donations to Africa will simply solve this problem is a pipe-dream. The misled belief that secularism is and should be foundational to human living has hegemonized an ignorance of global-affairs that has been around for a long time, but that is now particularly potentially damaging. It is God who is one, not secularism. Understanding required today necessitates Westerners using indigenous languages and resources in their interactions with African communities.