

Sidestepping Patronage with Vulnerable Mission

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Oral presentation version: <http://www.vulnerablemission.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Harries-J%E2%80%94Sidestepping-Patronage-with-Vulnerable-Mission-small.mp3>

Video presentation version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jQAi9pv914c>

Biography Jim Harries, PhD (b. 1964), born and raised in the UK, has lived in Southern then Eastern Africa since 1988. Jim has consistently lived at ‘people level’, rearing local children in his home, engaging using African languages. He works with a large variety of indigenously-run churches, in bible teaching, in addition to some hospital chaplaincy, plus research and writing with respect to the contemporary African context as it pertains to mission and development in Africa.

For a fictitious case-study of how a contemporary missionary to Africa might counter problems of patronage, read Harries (2017); *African Heartbeat: and a vulnerable fool*.

1/ The Alliance for Vulnerable Mission – a personal perspective

Amongst the things I learned as a secondary school teacher of agriculture in Zambia (1988-1991) was about problems caused when Western missionaries in charge were the donors to what was going on, while using Western languages, and while because they were outsiders, they were also the most ignorant of the context. I realised that as a foreign missionary I needed to be vulnerable to the context. Hence, when beginning ministry in Kenya (1993, this time as bible teacher) I determined as-far-as-possible to keep my ministry dependent on *local* resources and *local* languages.¹

The failure of other missionary initiatives to follow the ‘vulnerable mission’ principles; use local languages and resources (i.e. don’t buy people using outside money) appeared more and more crazy as the years went by. 2003 to 2007 I wrote my PhD thesis. In 2007 I made my first trip to the USA, to convince mission bodies of the need for vulnerable mission. I expected American missiologists to ‘see the light,’ but was instead surprised by the heavy

¹ At the same time, since 1997, I have been rearing on average about 12 orphan children in my African village home, with the help of an African housemother. I am single.

opposition I received to notions of missionary vulnerability. We founded the AVM (Alliance for Vulnerable Mission), that advocates that some missionaries work with local languages and local resources (i.e. that they should not relate to local people as patrons using foreign money) in 2007. Stan Nussbaum was a founder member. Chris Flanders was, for a number of years, on our executive board. We have had many conferences on this theme in the USA, UK and Germany since then. (Our conferences have tended to have a low attendance.) Also, in 2010, 2013, 2017, I made trips visiting seminaries and Christian Universities in the USA (each trip for about 10 weeks, visiting 10 to 15 seminaries) promoting the same agenda.

Because this conference is about patronage, I will not focus much on linguistic issues. But, I should mention straight away – that adoption by African countries of European languages for education and official purposes makes them incredibly liable to domination by foreign patrons in extraordinarily unhealthy ways. I believe that awareness of linguistic issues is an important and necessary compliment to awareness of issues of patronage.

I have published many articles in missiological, theological and related journals, that pertain to the above issues, of unhealthy patronage and ‘linguistic imperialism’, from 1998 to date.² That includes 8 books, the latest a novel called *African Heartbeat: and a vulnerable fool*.

2/ Vulnerable Mission is about ‘gifts’

Debates tend to be recognised by key terms that they use. Hence, the key term at this conference is ‘patronage’. That is related to gift-giving. ‘In hindsight’, in a sense, these are key areas of discussion in the AVM (Alliance for Vulnerable Mission), even though we have rarely used either term ‘gift’ or ‘patronage’. I acknowledge, with John Barclay and others, Mauss’ foundational contribution to this area of understanding (Barclay 2017, Mauss 1967).

The West, in its aid programmes and relationship with the majority world, tends to build on thinking that has emerged from Christian theology, that it is possible to give a ‘free gift’, i.e. using Barclay’s terminology, a gift with no circularity (Barclay 2017 ch. 1). Yet, as Barclay and others have realised, this is a myth. In practice, gifts set up obligations. These obligations appear to be inseparable from ‘spiritual spheres’ of life, in ways that I have discussed in Harries (2015:61ff). In Africa, I suggest, the spiritual and the material are considered mutually creative. I will not go into that in more detail here.³

While since 2007 we have defined ‘vulnerable mission’ as not using ‘outside resources’, the resources we have focused on are those of monetary origin, so in effect we have advocated that some missionaries not base their ministries on foreign-gift-giving. This is exactly because ‘gifts’ set up dynamics that can easily finish missionaries, given all their ignorance and naivety of local contexts. That is – active engagement in gift giving requires deep

² <https://jimharries.academia.edu/>

³ For more detail on this see: <http://www.wciujournal.org/journal/article/material-things-in-the-context-of-relationships-in-the-non-western-world-es>

cultural knowledge and an identity that a foreigner from a different worldview typically does not have (Harries 2015b).

3/ Money-Patronage Kills

Patronage can be of different types. Money patronage, unfortunately, I would like to suggest, easily 'kills' other forms of patronage (Harries and Lewis 2012). Therefore, it needs singular attention.

Money-patronage is killing Africa, in ways that I want to try to outline in brief in this section.⁴

- The West prides itself on the increasing diversity of its populations. Particularly the USA and the UK, are said to be 'browning'. Yet, I would hazard to say, Africa is not getting any lighter. Meeting a black person in the UK, and probably he's lived there 30 years (plus he was born there). The Average White person one meets in Kenya, I hazard to guess, has been there 2 weeks. The average white person in Kenya is very ignorant.
- Because structures built in Kenya by white people are built using patronage, whatever white people do in Kenya ends up appearing to be patronage: look at magazines produced in the UK, and you find people of all shades portrayed. Look at a magazine in Kenya, and all the people portrayed are 'Kenyan'. Why? Because if you include a white person, all readers will straight away assume 'that's the boss'. This situation is a constant disaster. Why? Because the reputation of whites as 'patrons' prevents them from sharing anything except money (Harries and Lewis 2012). That is – non-money patronages are killed at birth. E.g. a gifted white singer / politician / preacher / intellectual will never thrive in today's Africa (except in 'white islands'). This is denying African people access to many benefits of globalisation that the West is enjoying.
- No multiculturalism. I will come back to 'racism' below. In brief, there can be no multiculturalism in Africa, because patronage by wealthy donors forces Africa to live the lie that it's people are Western. When life is built on a lie, foreigners have to be kept at arm's length, or one gets 'found out'. But, there is no choice but to live a 'lie', or donor money will dry up.
- Corruption. Corruption is closely related to the above. Corruption, as well illustrated by Barclay, is operation according to the patron-client system in contexts that are not patron-client.⁵ Yet, truly effective action against graft is impossible, because in order to acquire funds the same graft is concealed. Should a foreigner set out to

⁴ Note that part of the problem is the use of European languages in Africa.

⁵ Barclay explains that, on today's standards, much of NT society would be considered. "one huge system of corruption and graft" (2017 *).

expose the breadth and depth of corruption, then he runs the risk of being accused of being 'racist'.

- Killing African languages. African peoples have responded faithfully to their patrons. The more powerful the patron, the more one sucks up to his every word. The West (for which read also the 'global community', UN, World Bank, etc.) hold Africa on their little finger. Outside languages have become the norm in education. This has made education into a farce of imitation (Matundura 2004).
- The above, particularly, is killing thinking by African people. If we continue to look at education: the model of education aspired to in much of Africa is that of the UK or America. This means that indigenous innovation in education is always a lowering of its standard. Hence the best teacher in Africa doesn't 'think', he regurgitates.

4/ The Pincer

One thing that made me fearful of attending this conference, has been the need for me to keep my distance with patron-missionaries, which is most missionaries.⁶

One meets a white missionary. One is polite. One realises that the missionary is ignorant on many things. They are desperately searching for a means to orient themselves in the strange world in which they have found themselves. They have money, or they have the potential to have money. Therefore they acquire local clients who are interested in that money. Should I say anything contrary to the financial aspirations of those clients or potential clients, I will simply be acquiring enemies, and can easily be pincer-ed-out!

The 'pincer' issue is very big. It has perhaps been the primary driver towards transforming the missionary body from long-term to short-term mission. This is related to what I have mentioned above. A field-missionary who has learned language and culture over many years has acquired an understanding that his fellow countrymen in his passport-country do not have. If it were not so, then language/cultural learning would be a waste of time. Should though his 'boss' come from the West, and engage directly with an African using a Western language, the main concern for the African will almost certainly (and very understandably) be financial. He will agree with the boss that finance is needed, the agreement that the 'boss' is looking for, so that any contrary intervention by the long-term missionary will be received as an illegitimate undermining of the indigenous person's rightful authority: Either long-term missionaries must learn to shut-up, or they should go home.

5/ Anti-racism in the West

Prohibition of racism is a thinly veiled strategy aimed at denying the presence of the patron client system amongst African and other people of majority world origins living in the West. The fear is of course, that should the cat come out of the bag, questions might be asked

⁶ The Coptic Orthodox church is perhaps part an exception. For them, the power of the bishop is such, that other 'missionaries' are clients to him, and therefore themselves 'patrons' to a more limited/controlled degree.

about the origins of 'those benefits' of Western culture that arise from not following the patron / client system. If the results of exploration are similar to those carried out by Barclay, that Christian notions of the 'free-gift' arising from Jesus' self-sacrifice for mankind, have underlain what the modern West is today, that implies a need for the Gospel in the contemporary world. Such a need for the Gospel confounds theories of the adequacy of secularism, into which the Western world has heavily invested over the last 70 plus years.

Much more could be said about anti-racism. What is being prohibited or concealed is clearly not genetic, but 'cultural'. Anti-racism is a brand of white-chauvenism. If it were not so, the anti-racist norm would vary between countries and communities, e.g. in India to be 'non-racist' one would treat non-Indians as if they are Indians. In reality, anti-racism is about treating everyone like a Protestant-like Westerner.

An undermining of the anti-racist agenda clearly carries many ramifications which go beyond our discussion here that focuses on patriarchy. In anti-racism we see a massive, deceptive, patriarchal control of the West 'over' Africa.

6/ The Invention of World Religions

The tentacles of patriarchy go far and wide. Especially in the 19th Century, Western Protestant people started telling Asians 'who they were'. That is, for example, they designed Buddhism on the basis of some obscure written texts (Almond 1988). The surprising thing should be, that many Asian people were very happy to accept that label. Why did they accept it? Because acceptance of the label 'Buddhist' became financially and otherwise rewarding. World religions, hence, have been invented then developed on the back of European Protestantism on account of the wealth produced by European peoples.⁷

The case of Africa is a little different from that of Asia. African ways of life being almost universally considered 'inferior', it has been in African people's interests to *deny* being who they are. Instead, they have adopted identity as Christians (unless Muslim). This has happened such that nowadays Christianity and traditional African ways of life have in many places become indistinguishable (Oladipo 2017:5).⁸

7/ Translation issues

We might note that Xerxes was careful, when sending news around to his provinces, to write instructions in each different language (Esther 1:22). This principle seems more recently to have gone to the wind. The global system increasingly runs on one language. The injustice in such system is enormous, particularly for those who found themselves economically compelled to adopt Western languages for official purposes (Alexander 1999).

⁷ For more on this issue of invention of world-religions and African traditional religion, see Harries (2018) and Harries (2016).

⁸ I do not say here whether this is good or bad, but merely state it as a 'fact'.

An issue here revolves around translation. Modern presumptions pointed to the possibility that translation between languages and cultures is possible, and in fact it has been suggested that anything that can be said in one language can be said in another. Post-modernism has, too late, realised the folly in this, when the eggs are already gathered in too-confined a basket. Much is invested in the globalisation of English, as if people chose English freely, when it is patronage of the West that increasingly forces their hand.

8/ Conference Dynamics

The last issue to be mentioned here, I get from Harries (2018:288-291); global conferences that almost invariably run in English and are represented by haves (Westerners) and have-nots (Africans) oblige African delegates to play intricate games, that in the end will result in their agreeing with Western agendas in so far as they preserve their financial gain. Using conferences to ascertain 'truth' on a global scale, has become a mockery.

If patronage were the only option available to human society, then we might simply have to consider that to practice it is morally acceptable. It appears however that in the West the hegemony of patronage has been weakened – aspects of Western life can operate based on other-than-patriarchy. The prosperity of the West seems to have arisen through *denying* some, or many, traditions associated with patronage. For the West to relate to others on the basis of a level of patronage that it has itself put aside is surely hypocrisy, or at least deception. I believe that the West, especially because of its global power, should here be morally obligated to honesty. Such honesty requires acknowledgement of the role of the Gospel in countering patronage in its own history, and concomitantly a prioritising of the Gospel when it comes to advocating a way forward for others. This requires mainstreaming of Christian mission.

9/ Vulnerability

Given the vast complexity of the Global scene, the particular mission solution that we have in the AVM been advocating for contemporary times, at individual level, is that some Western missionaries in the majority world engage some ministry through local languages and local resources.

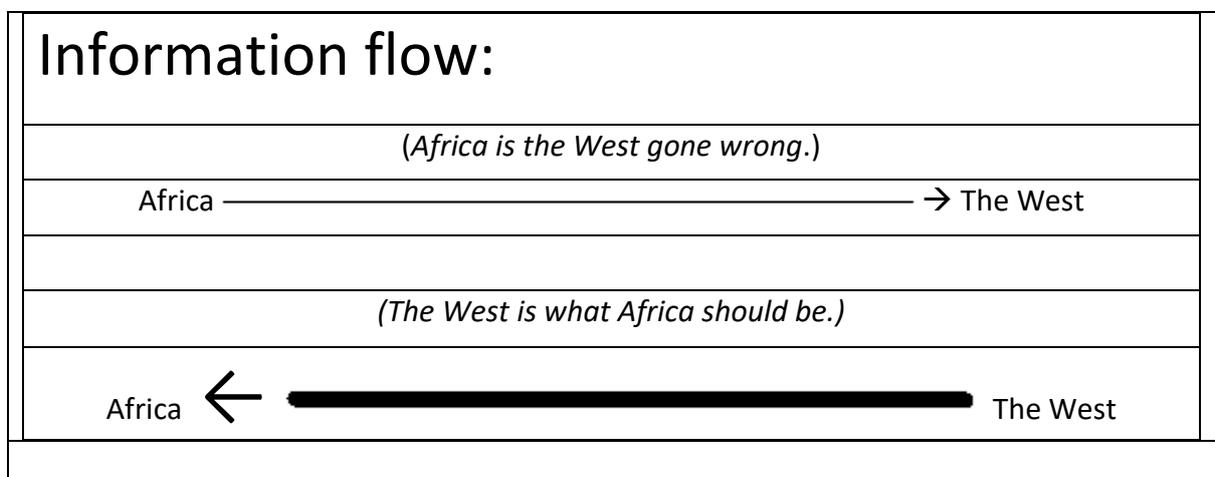
This is on the basis that the current situation is that illustrated in Tables 1 and 2 below:

Table 1.

Africa	The West
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- what Africa says to the West:	- what the West says to Africa
We know who you are.	We don't care who you are. ⁹
You have nothing to learn from us.	You have everything to learn from us.
We learn from you.	We teach you.
We are people.	We are god(s) (Ogunnaike 2016).
To be like you is our dream.	To be like you is our nightmare.
We want your money.	We have money for you.

Table 2.



To counter the effects of patriarchy, vulnerable mission is proposed on the basis of assumptions that:

1. Some Westerners are intelligent, and could contribute something of value to Africa (especially the Gospel) if they manage to acquire contextual knowledge. (My comment here is about Westerners, because it is their 'cultural intelligence' that is under question: It is widely assumed that African people can function effectively in Western contexts, but Westerners are discouraged from functioning in Africa in the light of African cultural realities.)
2. A key to overcoming some of the damaging effects of patriarchy is for the West to be **better informed** about its impact on Africa. This requires Western people who are *vulnerable* to African contexts, i.e. it requires the practice of vulnerable mission.
3. We need *vulnerable* Western people who will relate to Africa through indigenous African languages, who operate without buying Africans into compliance to their thinking. These people should be providing the mainstream of education about Africa in the West.

⁹ On the basis that racism is condemned, i.e. in the West all 'races' of people should be treated as if they are Western.

4. Teaching should always be from known to unknown. This requires Westerners to teach fellow Westerners (who are known to them) about Africa, and Africans to teach fellow Africans (who are known to them) about the West. Education in the West should be in Western languages, and in Africa be in African languages.

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