

Providence and Power Structures in  
Mission and Development  
Initiatives from the West to the Rest:  
a critique of current practice

Jim Harries  
Kima International School of Theology  
PO Box 75  
Maseno  
Kenya  
[jimoharries@gmail.com](mailto:jimoharries@gmail.com)

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**Bio-Data:** Jim Harries, who has worked in Zambia and then Kenya since 1988, is a part-time lecturer at Kima International School of Theology, Maseno, Kenya, and teacher/coordinator of the Yala and Siaya Theological Centres in the same locality. He holds a PhD in Theology from the University of Birmingham in UK, plus degrees in Agriculture (BSc), Rural Development (MA) and Biblical Interpretation (MA). He is a fluent speaker of Kiswahili and Dholuo (Kenyan languages) and has had a number of articles on mission published, including 'Biblical Hermeneutics in Relation to Conventions of Language use in Africa' (ERT (2006) 30:1.) This was a background paper was presented to the WEA Theological Consultation on evangelical political engagement held at Palmer Seminary, Pa, USA, July 31, 2007. .

Healthy tensions in power relationships that are a normal part of Western businesses, schools and churches help to render these institutions effective. But what of the institutions of 'mission' and 'development intervention' from the 'West to the rest'? Rooted historically in the biblical command to go to all nations with the Gospel (as found in Matthew 28:19, Acts 1:8 and elsewhere) the latter can be said to be founded on a providential basis. Such a providential foundation for operations unfortunately leaves recipients with little effective authority for counterbalancing or critiquing the way in which they are carried out. While advocated in the Bible for the spreading of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the much wider application of such providentially based principles between the West and the rest today may not be wise.

This author suggests that power relations that include effective mechanisms for feedback from recipients to donors are vital in order to achieve successful aid / development programmes. Until these are put into place the current system of doing development by foreigners is on dodgy ground. (The motivation found in Western societies today for engaging in development activities in distant parts of the 'poor' world is here assumed originally to be Christian. As in the activity of sharing the

Gospel, the continuation of development interventions is not dependent on their success, but arises from a perceived spiritual/heart-felt imperative.)

## **I Foundational Assumptions**

In the arguments made in this essay I assume a linguistic incompatibility between the West and the non-West. The fact that one language (such as English) is used in international debate does not mean that people from vastly different cultural backgrounds such as African as against European can engage in intelligent dialogue, because the implicatures underlying African people's uses of words are as different from the European ones as are the cultures.

I also question the commonly assumed nature of 'dialogue'. Considering discourse as dialogue ignores the role played by 'third parties'. These could be ancestral spirits, witches or gods eavesdropping on conversations, or the concern that conversants in a 'dialogue' have as to how their words will be reported to others. That dialogues are actually polylogues with unknown participants is, I suggest, often insufficiently considered. ('Speakers must take all their recipients into account to some degree [and this] ... can lead to apparently contradictory utterances' shares Kerbrat-Orecchioni.

Given these factors, Western people relying on Africans to tell them about the impact of their interventionist strategies is as bad as African people's relying on Europeans to guide their country's development. For development to be effective, I suggest in this essay (as also elsewhere), it needs to come from the 'inside'.

I use the terms 'missionary' and 'development worker' largely interchangeably in this essay because of an apparent merging of roles in recent years. Rational and materially based means towards the promotion of material human well-being have usurped much of mission's traditional evangelistic and proselytizing role. That is, more and more 'missionaries' and mission agencies are these days involved in and concerned for 'development activities', broadly defined, rather than primarily in Gospel-transmission. (This is sometimes known as integral mission or holistic mission.)

I take the term 'providence' as referring to those times or programmes which overtly or intentionally rely on God (or fortune, luck, divine intervention) for their success. I consider the term politics to refer to the power dynamics of interpersonal relationships.

Many of today's charitable institutions, such as Oxfam, the UN, the World Bank, ODA etc. operate on an apparently secular foundation. This is surprising to some African people, who understand God as being the source of good and the motivation for people to be compassionate in this world.<sup>1</sup> How can some Western people be denying the relevance and action of God in their lives, yet continue to be motivated to be charitable, they ask? One likely reason (to me the most plausible) is related to 'the ghost of dead religious beliefs.'<sup>2</sup> That is, the West continues to be driven by its Christian heritage even in cases (such as in today's 'secular' European Community) when Christianity is officially repudiated.

We can take an example of how this has arisen from anthropological accounts of non-Western peoples, particularly those practicing primal religions ('animism'). Many researchers tell us that primal religionists are chiefly concerned for the wellbeing of fellow clan members or blood relatives. My own research into the history of the Luo people of Western Kenya indicates the same. So for example, the theft of cattle is not traditionally considered by the Luo a crime if it is from those people outside of one's kinship network or clan.<sup>3</sup> It is biblical and Christian teaching, I suggest, that has given many Western peoples a global view of the world and a heartfelt desire for the well being of otherwise unknown human beings with whom they have no blood relationship.

It is important to remember that the biblical command for love to non-relatives, exemplified by well known (in evangelical circles) passages such as John 3:16 and Matthew 28:19, originated in pre-modern society. Therefore the good news that it was commanding should be shared with people

from all lands was primarily of a providential nature. That is, it was good news of what God has done and can do, and not good news of what man can do without God's help. I suggest that today's secular Western society has retained the moral imperative of being concerned for all of mankind around the globe, while rejecting its original divine workings.

This accepting of a principle while denying its source and the details of its original association is what I am suggesting has put current mission and development practices onto an uncertain foundation. Does a moral imperative for Christians to spread the Christian Gospel extend to the same imperative for the spreading of Western wealth, technology and civilisation? If it does, we can still ask whether the same methodology is necessarily appropriate for both, or whether the means for spreading the good news of material wellbeing ought to be different to those of spreading the Gospel of Jesus?

I suggest that they need to be different, and that this is for at least one important reason: while the Gospel is held by faith and spread by the use of words without creating dependency on either foreign thought-forms, rationality or technology, the same cannot be said for so-called 'development'. A basic fault with recent practice in the area of so-called 'development intervention' is that it is inappropriately modelled on a Christian foundation, while the broader features of Christian practice are ignored. Development, and that part of Christian-mission that go beyond the biblical foundation of 'vulnerable mission' (in which the carrier of the message is not loaded with material and financial advantage), has still to find a model for intervention that can render it truly effective.

Such a model needs to be politically and not merely providentially astute. That is, we should not rely on God to intervene to ensure that development thinking and technology takes root, just because he inspires people to accept the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In other words the model needs to overcome the tendency of creating situations whereby it is in the interests of receiving communities to accept the material that is being advanced, without necessarily understanding or implementing those parts of the original plan that are a pre-requisite for the long-term sustainability of the intervention concerned on rational grounds.

Consulting the literature, one finds numerous anecdotal accounts of failure in interventions into the Third World. That is, numerous incidents in which projects supposedly designed for some long-term self-sustaining strategy, are used for short-term material gain.<sup>4</sup> This is sometimes called misappropriation of funds, corruption, 'eating' (East African English) or even theft. The very frequency of this occurrence however suggests that this negative perspective on such practices is not shared by many of the recipients of outside funds. That is, the donors concerned have failed to set up a dynamic that sufficiently orients recipients to postponed-consumption, but have left loopholes which made it in their political interests to abuse the system, as designed. In other words, donors place too strong a reliance on providence.

## **II The Running of Institutions in the West**

Western institutions usually operate in the West with (at least) two kinds of political players – those in charge, and those under them. The tension arising from the interaction between these two groups, if well handled, results in effective performance of the task at hand. For example, college principals do not expect automatic and total acquiescence on the part of students. Rather a good Principal (US English – President) will optimize acquiescence. Too little is called indiscipline. Too much prescribes innovation, initiative, imagination and with it contentment, satisfaction and, we could say, normal types of healthy social interaction. The same applies to the director of a company, president of a country, parents of children, consultant in a hospital or even pastor of a church. While the details in types and limits of authority vary widely, it is always true that authority exercised within appropriate limits results in a healthy tension between leaders and followers whereas excessive or insufficient authority will result in problems.

An effective institution will have mechanisms for dealing with authority that is exercised in excess of or below acceptable limits. These mechanisms include: strikes, complaints procedures, verbal persuasion, incentives and reward structures, regulatory bodies, reprimands, the press, and regulations such as on the freedom of speech, rights of appeal, and so on. At the very basic level these include: a common language and culture between leaders and followers, mutual appreciation of the objectives of the institution concerned, commitment to a common aim, patience and perseverance, an ability to persist in the face of adversity and so on.

Having described these very familiar authority structures, I want to go on to consider Christian mission and Christian or secular development activities from ‘the West to the rest’ in the same respect. That is, given that Western societies are very careful to pay close attention to mechanisms such as the above in their key institutions ‘at home’, I want to consider how they are handled in respect to foreign mission(s). How do Western-originated institutions ensure an appropriate equilibrium in authority relationships in promoting mission and development?

Authority structures clearly vary between types of institution. Mission is inseparable from the church. The authority structures of churches can be very different from those of other institutions. Some would argue that church structures need to be the starting point in considering mission. Characteristics of church authority structures appear to include that a church is (these days) a voluntary organisation. Most of the people contributing to the work of a church are laity. People function in the church on the basis of love. The church provides a context for serving and obeying God, hence theology is a key part of it. The motivation of both clergy and laity is assumed to be other than financial or material, and have much to do with spirituality, eternity and, of course, God. Few Christians would question that mission work should be integral to the church. For some, mission defines the church, and it is a missions oriented church that is a ‘renewed’ church. (‘Contemporary theology needs renewal by mission studies,’ says Walls.<sup>5</sup>) The prevalence of the word ‘mission’ indicates that it also has its own distinct identity: i.e. ‘mission’ is not a synonym for church. The existence of this distinction means that there must be some kind of power-relationship between church and mission.

It may be important to consider this relationship. On which side can the ‘authority’ figures be found? Who follows whom? How do the various leaders enforce their authority? What mechanisms exist for ensuring that authority is exercised appropriately? What happens when contraventions occur that would result in indiscipline or in too great a control of the church by mission, or mission by the church?

I am going to focus my attention on foreign mission as carried out by the Western church. Mission from the West is often considered to be bedevilled by paternalism (including mission studies itself according to Walls.<sup>6</sup> What are appropriate authority roles for these mission sending institutions, whether they be professional agencies, committees put in place by churches, the missionaries themselves or any combination of the above? What mechanisms are in place to ensure that an appropriate equilibrium is maintained for good relationship and effective performance in the various tasks engaged in by the two sides—mission and target community? Who holds the authority, pulls the strings and sets the pace, and who are the ‘followers’? With what other institution can the relationship between Western missions and the people they are reaching be compared?

The initiative in mission from the West has been and is in the West. Hence mission consists of the Western church’s efforts at reaching the rest of the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ, or motivated by the gospel of Jesus Christ. (Non-Western churches are also engaged in their own mission efforts. These are not my concern in this essay.) The mission enterprise is in this respect unlike a college (the example considered above), but more like a business. This is because whereas in schools teachers work to meet expressed needs of parents to provide education for their children under the direction of government, in business the initiative is taken by a businessman to meet the needs of people for other reasons.

A missionary will take the initiative to meet the needs of people. But a missionary will not intend to make a material profit from the people, and the needs that a missionary will seek to meet are not only material or temporal but also spiritual and eternal. As a businessman will often attempt to make people aware of needs so as subsequently to satisfy them, a missionary may endeavour to make people aware of needs (for salvation, a relationship with God, an infilling of the Spirit of God etc.) of which the people may have been unaware, before enlightening them on how to fulfil those needs. The accountability of a businessman to his customers occurs via the market and people's satisfaction with the product they receive. Government activity assists the market process by providing watchdogs to counter the setting up of monopolies, standards regulations and a facility for the customer to take legal action should a product not meet specifications. But, what are the measures that make missionaries (development workers) accountable to the people they are reaching?

We have already mentioned that a gospel-missionary's prime motivation in making a 'product' available is 'out of this world.'<sup>7</sup> Because customers do not pay Western missionaries for their service, there are no market mechanisms in place to ensure quality either of the product or its delivery. When payment by customers is not required to ensure the continuation of the mission exercise, then the market cannot be relied upon to ensure product-quality. The same applies to many aid or development workers today who are funded from the West.

In terms of the valuation of its product, mission more closely resembles schools than businesses. Hence mission is about making 'disciples', a term that is close in meaning to 'students' (*mathētēs* in the Greek New Testament). Schools are forced to use examinations and assignments to evaluate their output. What then of missions? People evaluating the performance of certain missionary activity, typically the donors supporting the activity concerned, are forced to use types of 'examination'. Because the missionary (or development worker) is operating in a culture and context with which the donors themselves are largely unfamiliar, qualitative measures are generally ineffective (for example, the donor does not know the language of the recipients), so quantitative alternatives must be employed. These include measures of the number of people converted, number of churches planted, attendance at events, and less specifically time spent on the field, languages learned by the missionary, perceived measurable changes in people's ways of life resulting from conversion to Christianity or adoption of a particular practice such as cell churches, and so on.

On the part of development workers the situation is similar, where donors will attempt to measure some quantitatively discernable improvement in 'well-being' of the target population—such as a reduction in the incidence of disease, improvement in longevity or increase in the quantity of food produced. Both these cases differ from the businessman's model because the products that they offer, do not require payment.

The reader may want to point out that payment can be required. For example a development worker may demand money in exchange for fertiliser, a hospital for medicines, and a Christian missionary for hymnbooks. While this is true, it is not the mission or development part of what they are doing. The whole point of their activities could be described as being 'subsidy'. That is, missionaries can bring Bibles for sale without charging for their transport, hospitals make medicines available cheaply and development workers' delivering fertiliser saves a trip to the store. Whatever charge is made is not a part of the missionary or development work, but a residue of the market system in the context of which the missionary or development worker operates.

The difference between mission as it is done 'from the West to the rest' and the operations of a church, include the idea that whereas members in the West typically make a net contribution to their church, members (i.e. people reached by) Western missions are often major net recipients of funds from the mission. Whereas the church offers services arising from the contributions of its members, Western-mission (as also development agencies) offer services that require its members to receive.

Whereas the operations of Western churches, schools and businesses are well known and relatively easy to study, the same cannot be said for the receiving-end of intercultural mission or development work. The primary reasons for this include the fact that the recipients are culturally, linguistically

and geographically distant from the West. In addition, because they have been made dependent on a supply system that they do not understand or control, the only role that they may be left with is that of doing whatever is in their power to ensure its continuation.

Perhaps a few more examples will illustrate this lack of effective feedback mechanisms. Someone who goes out to a shop (or uses the internet) to purchase a new watch will be likely to return it and complain if it is not working, because not to do so would be to allow the money they have spent to go to waste. But they are much less likely to take action if an unknown foreigner makes a donation of a watch, and then the watch ends up not working. They may even thank the foreigner for their gift in appreciation of their good intent and choose not to say that actually the watch never worked so as not to discourage the foreigner's charitable orientation. This applies to many kinds of gifts and services.

Schools have different kinds of feedback mechanism to this, but are careful to ensure that they do exist. Students themselves can take action in schools, as can parents through all kinds of complaints procedures such as making an appointment with the Principal, choosing to move to another school, speaking to the chairman of the parent-teachers-association etc. Church members communicate with their clergyman through their elders, by speaking up at committees, through visiting the clergyman, or threatening to leave the church.

Mission and development projects seeking to reach people in the Third World generally have none of these mechanisms. That is, recipients of services such as education in the Third World do not have access to its (Western) initiators. Whereas church members in the West contribute tithes and offerings to their church, members of churches in the Third World are often net recipients from their churches because church finances are bolstered by foreign aid. As a result, church leaders are not answerable to their members. It is difficult to complain or take action about something to which one is not contributing, so malpractice in provision of services through aid tends to continue. Nationals appointed to supervise aid / development projects are closer to the communities of the recipients than those of the donors and so, especially because donors anyway have only limited understanding of what goes on in Third World communities, will side with the locals on questions of (mis)appropriation of funds. One doesn't complain if something received is poor quality, if the thing is anyway given without cost.

To try and avoid some of the above difficulties, some donors insist that a proportion of the contributions to a given project or initiative arise locally. They apparently do not realise that there are other donors operating on the same basis, and it is not difficult for local people to use one donor to make the contribution which the other donor requires to be of 'local origin'. Communities can quickly tire of donors who think that, through having made their contribution, they have acquired the authority to force local people to take certain actions. For example, donors who contribute the cost of materials for a church building who then insist that locals contribute their labour freely according to the foreigner's timetable. Remember – that it is hard to say no to a donor, because of the financial spin-offs that arise from almost all projects, because you don't look a gift horse in the mouth, and because head-on confrontation with someone who has a clearly expressed what they want to do is widely considered to be disrespectful.<sup>8</sup>

I began this essay by explaining the importance of having healthy interactions between givers and receivers of services and authority. I have looked at three models in the west—church, school and business. I have found that mission (and development) work fall somewhere between these. But I have also found that a major difference between mission and the other three is in the feedback mechanisms that are possible. Schools, businesses and churches in the West can have effective feedback mechanisms, as each provide a service that costs the consumer and/or in the success of

which the consumer is closely invested and/or of which the consumer has a relatively close understanding. None of these apply to missionary efforts as practiced by the West to the rest today.

### **III Implications for Providence and Political Involvement**

It would appear that in institutions such as churches, schools and businesses in the West, Christians (as others) make much use of feedback and regulatory mechanisms to ensure smooth interaction between leaders and followers. But then, why do mission-based activities continue on the basis of ‘providence’ (i.e. without effective feedback mechanisms)? Is this not a double standard? In my view, this is unjust. It could even be considered racist, as such practices only continue for certain non-Western ‘races’. It is certainly risky—as it is operating blind. The impact of doing ‘mission’ and ‘development’ in this way is these days being seen in the form of much publicised widespread failure,<sup>9</sup> although the source of this failure is less commonly understood.

Known negative impacts are largely anecdotal. But there are *many* of them, and stories of the disasters created by aid and paternalistic mission are widely known (see above.) I suggest that trusting providence in the implementation of (integral or holistic) mission and development initiatives is not good enough. There is a need for political accountability. That is—attention to the power implications of the roles of the parties involved. Only this will enable us to bring about the kinds of interactions that are normal in effective institutions within the West itself.

The New Testament enjoins believers in Jesus Christ to spread the good news to all people. In recent decades (centuries?) the good news of Jesus being confused with the ‘good news’ of Western material prosperity, has resulted in the assumption that this prosperity needs to be spread like the gospel as a matter of providence. But this ignores the very real difference between the two. Spreading the gospel (if well done) because it does not need material investment, results in healthy relationship, interdependence rather than dependence and a boosting of existing local culture and institutions<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, spreading wealth that happens to be generated through an economic system of questionable biblical legitimacy (capitalism) quickly, and it seems unavoidably, generates dependence, corruption, division, idleness and so on. (Some continue to argue that this is avoidable within the existing system. These people are determined to engage themselves in trying to avoid it while continuing with the development/mission process in the same way. But, given the lack of effective control mechanisms mentioned above I suggest that these problems are an inherent part of the way mission/development is done these days, and not an unfortunate occasional anomaly.) The way the West continues to spread wealth without consideration of the political (i.e. power) dynamics that arise as a result is an inappropriate leaning on ‘providence’.

As a result, I suggest that the model of doing-mission (and doing-development) with extensive use of resources from the wealthy West, needs to be reconsidered. What I have clearly identified in this essay is a lack of (or even the absence of) feedback mechanisms in current ways of operating. The causes for the absence of such mechanisms needs serious attention in order to get responsible institutions onto a realistic foundation. The ways to do this include:

- a. The use of the language of the people being reached to be used in the design, implementation and evaluation of a project.
- b. Having projects that are not dependent on foreign financial or material inputs, so as to avoid the imbalance in power and dependency that this generates.
- c. A reduced reliance on ‘providence’ by the West in activities that they would never consider carrying out through ‘providence’ in their own contexts.

An alternative to (c) would be to adjust institutions in the West to be more reliant on providence. That is, allowing a greater role for God in Western society will assist Westerners to understand how institutions operate on the basis of providence, and therefore be more able and informed to honestly

operate in the same way in the non-West. That is, for Western societies (such as the European Union) to be more overtly theological in their operations.

#### **IV Conclusion**

This article has shown that the West is happy to allow the impact of aid through missionary or other engagement with the Third World to be worked out ‘providentially’, even though equivalent actions by the West to their own people are carefully planned to include feedback mechanisms that ensure effective outcomes in other ways. This double standard—an expectation for God to work amongst foreign peoples that is not there in the West’s own context—is unhelpful, if not immoral. It needs to be corrected by attention to the power balance. That is, correcting the current situation in which almost all formal power in integral mission and development efforts, is in the hands of the donating West.

This correction requires a conscious self-depowerment on the part of the West and Westerners in these activities. Development and mission is these days guided primarily by Western languages, and powered by Western money. The way forward that I suggest, is that it be guided by languages local to the point of implementation, and be independent of Western funds. This is not to say that Westerners should not be involved in mission or development of the ‘poor’ parts of the world, but that they should operate using local languages, without subsidising their key activities using resources of foreign (Western) origin.<sup>11</sup>

1 Personal observation based on many conversations about God and godliness with African people.

2 Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Translated by Talcott Parsons) (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930), p. 182.

3 Paul Mboya, *Luo Kitgi gi Timbegi* (Kisumu: Anyange Press, 1983), p 12.

4 This is explained well by David Maranz, *African Friends and Money Matters: observations from Africa* (Dallas: SIL International, 2001).

5 Andrew Walls, 'Structural Problems in Mission Studies' in Gerald H. Anderson (ed.), *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 15:4 October 1991 (electronic edition), pp. 146-155.

6 Walls, 'Structural Problems in Mission Studies.'

7 This is only partially true. A Christian missionary assumes the Bible and the church to be God ordained and for it to be in the interests of a person to come to faith in Christ with all that this entails for the benefit of this world as well as the next. Yet promoting the Gospel in the interest of this-worldly gain easily results in the prosperity Gospel. And because the Gospel is considered to be ultimate truth, a missionary will share it even in circumstances in which its worldly-helpfulness is beyond human comprehension. This applies also, I have argued above, to the development worker.

8 See [www.jim-mission.org.uk/index](http://www.jim-mission.org.uk/index) for more articles on related issues.

9 See for example Michael Phillips, 'Unanswered Prayers in Swaziland. U.S. Preacher Sees his Dream Vanish. Mr. Wilkinson hits wall trying to push "orphan village."' Rodeo Stars Safari Guides. *The Wall Street Journal*. Monday December 19 2005. CCXLVI no. 133 pp A1/A8/A12. See also David K. Leonard and Scott Straus, *Africa's Stalled Development: international causes and cures* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003).

10 Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: the missionary impact on culture* (New York: Orbis Books, 1995), pp. 3-6.

11 For details of proposed conferences and other activities oriented at promoting 'vulnerable mission' as here espoused, see [www.vulnerablemission.com](http://www.vulnerablemission.com).