The Need for use of Local Languages and Resources in Mission to Africa

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Introduction

The AVM (Alliance for Vulnerable Mission) believes that some missionaries should engage in ministry, or at least a key ministry, using the languages and resources of the people they are reaching. This short paper provides a rationale for this in succinct form.

1. Language.

The task of a theologian, is to correct people's understanding of who God is and what he is saying. This is an implicitly contextual task – as God desires to speak to people differently, and the starting point of people's understanding is different.

Some people understand God as needing to guarantee material prosperity. They are heavily occupied in appealing for him to make them prosper. Others see God as being an irrelevance in an age in which human problems have been resolved without reference to him. They are left with a worldview that is meaningless.

Those who want God to provide for them 'need' to learn that God remains God even if he does not provide prosperity for all. God is not only to be worshipped according to the prosperity he provides. He should be adored just for who he is. The latter need to realize that scientific solutions to problems do not satisfy all human wants and that God loves people and desires to speak to them.

Emphasizing to people who believe that God should guarantee their prosperity that God loves them and desires to speak to them, can be to aggravate their misconceptions about God. Telling those who think that God might not exist in the first place that he should be adored even if he does nothing is to confirm their suspicions.
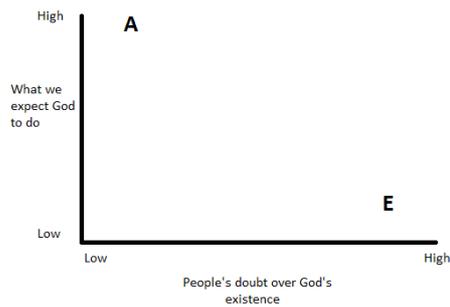
Diagram 1.

Diagram 1 shows the position of A (African people) and E (European people) with respect to their understanding of God as regards two of his qualities – what is expected of him, and the degree of doubt over his existence. A and E are in quite different positions.
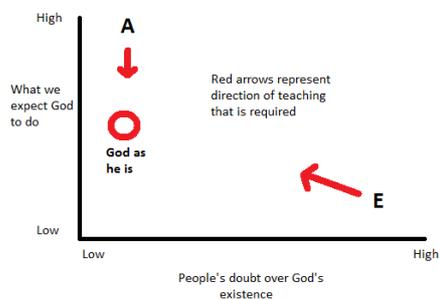
Diagram 2.

Diagram 2 shows God as he is (should be understood), and the arrows in red illustrate the way that theological teaching should be oriented for European people who doubt, and for African people who expect God to provide too much. *Note that the nature of the teaching required is culturally specific.* The wrong teaching to the wrong people will not help them, but could further mislead or confuse them.

Here we have a problem in Africa. The problem is, that African names for God (for example *Nyasaye* as in parts of western Kenya) are considered to be translations for European translations of God, such as God in English. This means that theological texts in English teach about God as if the understanding of him is European, to correct European people's wrong comprehensions. If those texts are taken to Africa, then they can give 'wrong' teachings.

In Africa, there is a need for the development of theological education that is contextually appropriate. A problem arises however if theological education is conducted in English. That is – European people who know English tend to control what gets published and is given a stamp of approval of theological orthodoxy. These people will not agree with what African people want to teach about God (i.e. *Nyasaye*), because to them it will be wrong. Hence contextual theology is prohibited.

The way to resolve the above in this globalised world is for people from very different cultural backgrounds to use different languages in what they teach about

God (*Nyasaye*). If this does not happen, African theology can never be 'correct'. Meanwhile European theology will be led astray in so far as African people without sufficient understanding influence European theological teachings.

Bible translators and others concerned for indigenous theology have often carefully considered their choice of a name for God. While there is no doubt that such consideration is important, this short article demonstrates that for theological debate to be carried out using the language of the people concerned may be even more important. This latter requirement apparently having received less attention has resulted in misconceptions about God, such as his role in the provision of 'prosperity', continuing largely unchallenged.

2. Resources

These days many local churches in the West seek to relate directly with African people, churches, and projects, as illustrated below.

Diagram 3.[1]
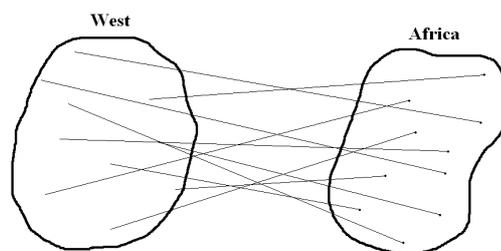
This is fantastic, because it gives local churches in the West the feeling that they are on the frontier of mission, and working directly with people of vastly different cultures. In my experience, many African people love this way of working because it enables them to benefit from the generosity of Westerners who are yet to be hardened by 'compassion fatigue' and difficult experiences. Europeans who work in this way are less aware of corruption.

Problems with this way of working include that individual churches in the West have little opportunity to learn from each other. Errors in understanding are repeated again and again for every local church in the West, and every Christian group being partnered in Africa. An additional problem arises when more than one group in the West partner with one body in Africa. Very often this leads to tensions between Westerners. Often Western people in Africa do not want to relate to one another, sometimes even they do not want to see each other. They have not gone to Africa to meet their fellow Europeans. They want to meet Africans. They can easily see their colleagues from Europe as doing things 'wrong'.

One alternative to the above is for Westerners to work together and learn from one another in their approaches to Africa. This is illustrated in diagram 3 below:

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[1] See also http://www.lausanneworldpulse.com/themedarticles.php/936?pg=1

Diagram 4.[2]
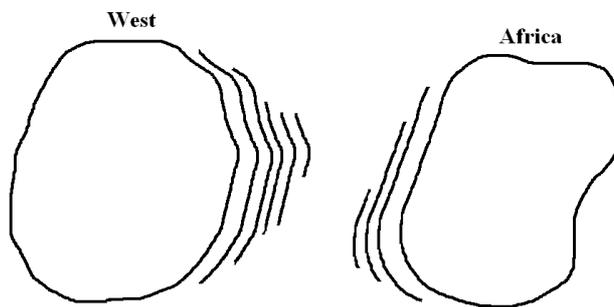
West   Africa

In this model, the West and Africa gradually move towards one another through a lot of cooperation in learning about how to meet the 'other'. The problem here is; that here mission is the realm of experts, local churches tend to get excluded, and personal relationships rarely arise between African and European people.

Many people today therefore prefer model 1 (relate directly to an African community), perhaps while encouraging some activity also to continue on the lines of model 2 (e.g. academic study of inter-cultural studies). Careful thought reveals that the problems of model 1 arise from two main sources:

a. Western churches tend to dominate and be paternalistic. They are free to choose what they will support with the funds that they have. Because African people are inclined to say 'yes' to the plans of people who come, this is especially problematic when two or more churches from the West engage with the same project. The fact that saying 'yes' results in money coming, makes it especially difficult for African people to discourage or openly advise someone who comes from the West. Many 'projects' end up being inappropriate. When this is discovered, sparks fly of one form or another, often resulting in a breakdown of relationship and/or the Westerner having to leave.

b. Although many Western people make a careful study of inter-cultural relationships, the burden of flexibility is often left to the African. This is because it is the African person who is usually expected to learn and know the European language and not the other way around. They are the ones who have to perform the very difficult task of translation. Yes, translation is very difficult! The expectation that the African do the difficult part of the work is unfair. If Westerners are taking the initiative and indeed have the money and educational systems and so on – why shouldn't they be the ones to learn the languages of Africa instead of the other way around?

The first model, in which people communicate directly from Western churches to African churches or projects, can work. It does require two things: i. that the Westerner take the time to learn the language and take responsibility for intercultural communication and not leave all the difficulties involved to the African as tends to be the case today. ii. That financial donations be left out of the design of projects or the functioning of these relationships. This latter is what we are calling 'vulnerable mission'.

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[2] See also http://www.lausanneworldpulse.com/themedarticles.php/936?pg=1

Conclusion

It is important for some missionaries from the West to carry out their ministry or part of their Christian ministry using the languages and resources of the people they are reaching.