

Jim Harries and Vulnerable Mission

Notes by Timothy V Reeves

October 2010

• Introduction

Jim's Motivation <http://www.jim-mission.org.uk/>

The good news of Jesus Christ, is that those who believe in him "shall not perish but have everlasting life". The shedding of the blood of Christ on the cross is forgiveness of sins for all those who believe in him.

That amazing news dominates my life.....That fantastic news changed the world, and continues to challenge me deeply and continually. Surely that is news that I cannot keep to myself? Wouldn't that be selfish? Good news needs to be spread.

That's the motivation behind my work in Africa, and the motivation behind this web site.

The Rude Awakening

Jim trained in agriculture in and did a PGCE in 1987. Went out to Africa in 1988 under the auspices of the Africa Evangelical Fellowship. He writes:

*My going to Africa was a part of God's plan to alleviate poverty. I was going to get justice done for the poor. I was bringing good news, and was going to demonstrate the good news of Jesus by **establishing effective agricultural practices**.....Agriculture was my love and fascination. Yes, I was born again, but Britain had told me that it was not my faith but my farming skills that I had that were of value.....I intended to transform farming practices. To enable people to grow more food and grow it better. That would help alleviate Africa's hunger problem.*

BUT:

Little did I know how my philosophy of language was to be challenged and radically altered in forthcoming years. Little did I realize that the Western resources that I anticipated would be an asset in ministry would turn out a bane of ministry!

This led Jim to changing his views, attitudes and goals thus leading to "Vulnerable mission"

2. The African Problem

Jim's Observations

Western missionaries lived separately from Africans and had (relatively) rich life styles.

If an African spends time with Whites, African people think he is after their money.

Apparent social visits by Zambians were a front for asking for something, typically, money.

Jim's African colleagues did not expect a Whiteman's projects to continue after the Whiteman had left unless another Whiteman took up the baton - and they don't continue if this doesn't happen.

The presence of Western resources had the effect of disturbing the equilibrium in the relationships between Africans, typically resulting in jealousy between them. ("Bicycle anecdote")

Jealousy is thought to be a motivatpr of bewitchment - therefore Africans feared being identified with wealth in case they became targets of witchcraft. The result: Surplus wealth is almost taboo.

Africans fear exploiting material surpluses of all kinds as it can result in witchcraft being practiced against those enjoying a surplus.

Inhibitions about raising the prices of farm products. Thus the opportunity to invest profits back into the farm business are thus lost. African businesses therefore have less chance of growing.

Christianity has become identified with English speaking and Western wealth so much so that Western wealth and the English language are regarded as a sign of a successful Christian life.

Animism: Spirits haunt the Cosmos. Good and bad spirits come with everything and are round every corner. Malign spirits have to be avoided and Good spirits not offended – this can inhibit a proper management of material resources.

Task and goal centeredness are less pronounced in African culture: Bad time keeping, poor organisation, conflation of means with ends. e.g. travel becomes an end in its own right rather than means of reaching a destination. (Perhaps these are good traits we have lost in the West?)

Very difficult to get Africans into Gospel based projects unless they see a prospect of Western resources and languages coming out of it.

Corruption/bribery endemic

Africans tend to study as a means of passing exams and not to gain knowledge for its own sake: The certificate is all important. There seems to be a lack of curiosity about how the world works.

Westerners are inclined to give scientific processes the credit for what God had done for them; African Christians find this difficult to square with how they think a born again Christian should behave.

Language problems. **Meaning = Text + Context**. In the African rural **context** an animistic world view predominates over a mechanical one. In Africa Jesus' exorcisms have far more significance than they do in the West.

- **Thesis.**

The following represents some of my back of the envelop theorizing in an attempt at a tentative sense making frame work. Treat with caution.

Western and Agricultural societies. (North of the Saharan barrier)

Western culture is based on agriculture. Eurasian animals were relatively docile and could be domesticated.

Agriculture has been around for the last 10,000 years. It requires investment and potentially can lead to fantastic surpluses and wealth, but tensions can result. cf Iron Age Britain and the hill forts.

The agricultural north has long invested in agriculture and has experience of coping with famine, large scale war and surpluses that are a byproduct of agriculture.

Agriculture encourages a detailed calendric knowledge re: motion of stars and the Sun. This can help prompt Sun and heavenly body worship.

Philosophical tension between a world that works on a rule based dynamic and a world ruled by “supernatural” spirits. This even extends to the concept of God.

Techno-scientific paradigm: The investment logic: I do “A” I’ll eventually get “B” out. The Westerner asks “Does it work?”

Go getting investment societies. Unlimited wealth and kudos is a permissible life style. People can become very rich and this encourages the entrepreneurial spirit and the “winner takes all” mentality.

Government: Writing has helped facilitate highly institutionalized government – systems rather than personalities.

Dealing with selfishness: Systems of justice that keep people in check.

Sub-Saharan Africa

Hunter-gatherers: Although some farming filtered down from the north Sub-Saharan Africa has come relatively late to Agriculture. African animals are wild and difficult to domesticate.

Hunter-gatherers: You don’t invest in, or manipulate nature. You take as and when nature provides. But don’t take too much; others may need it. No accumulators please.

Little or no astronomy: Moon based calendar (?). No sophisticated prototype mechanical astronomical model.

Preliterate concept of God as a distant Spirit. (Idolatry is less pervasive?)

Animism: Spirits and personified forces are the dynamic behind the world, not an impersonal logic – the Western tension between spirits and logic is less pervasive.

The notion of investment (“do this and eventually get B”) is not strong. You work as nature provides – and you have to keep on good relations with the spirits. The world cannot be exploited without spiritual ramifications. This inhibits exploitation. The African asks “Do the spirits mind?”

Farming primitive and not productive by Western standards: subsistence farming, not profit making.

Government: Preliterate Tribal societies; big personalities rather than big institutions.

Dealing with selfishness: Through jealousy and the threat of witchcraft “winner takes all” types are kept in Check. The African appeals to the Spirit world. Systems of justice weak.

Conclusions:

The above may help to explain some of Jim’s observations:

Why Africans easily become dependent.

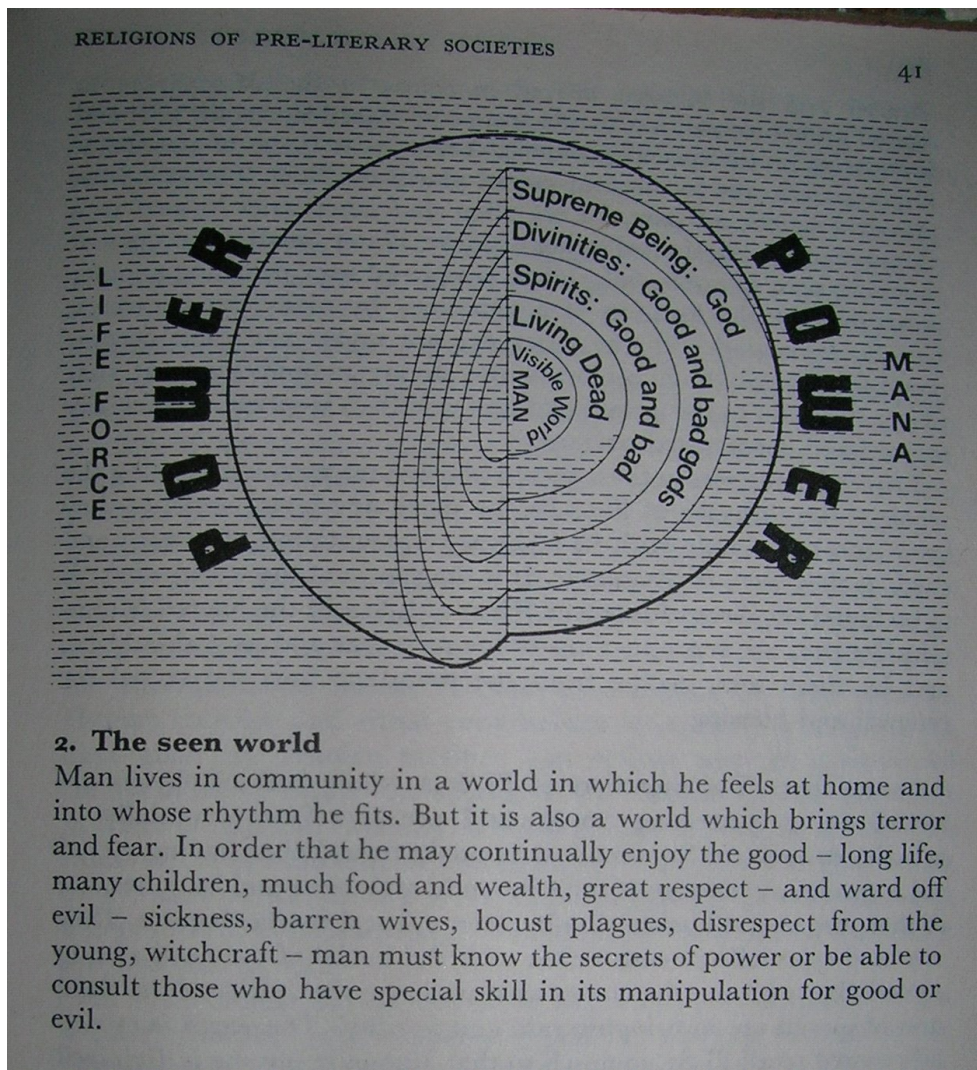
Why wealth can destabilize relations between Africans and be a trigger for witchcraft.

Why Christianity is linked to material health and wealth. (Because it seen as reward from the spirit realm)

• Africa versus the West: The Upsides

Western: Appreciation of a rule based world facilitates exploitation of that world. Willingness to exploit that world to the utmost. A potentially fantastic standard of living becomes possible. Christianity symbolizes the throwing out of demons; the fear of spirits recedes and makes this all possible. (but the saying “throwing out the baby with the bath water” comes to mind!)

African: Equality in tribal cultures (excepting leaders). Appreciation of the role of providence. Personality rather than “things” is the ultimate cosmic dynamic. Material contentment (if undisturbed by the West). Wholeness in their world view. Epistemic Humility. Environment not stressed



*Terror and wholeness live together in the African preliterate world view. This view is the **context** in the equation “**Meaning = Text + Context**”. Notice God’s distance.*

- **Africa versus the West: The Downsides:**

Western: Little appreciation of the role of providence: Exploiting impersonal mechanism is assumed to assure results: Epistemic arrogance. Inequalities and injustices. Rampant selfishness. Industrial scale warfare. Dualistic Tension: Spirit versus Material. “Death of God” theology. Institutionalized selfishness. Discontent. Over exploitation leads to stressed environment.

African: Inability to exploit a regular and ordered world. “Gatherer” mentality –only take as much as you need. Relatively poor. In thrall to a Spirit world and witchcraft. God distant. Terror of the spiritual world.

- **Summing up**

The two cultures are very different but both have a common core problem: selfishness at the expense of society which challenges the quality of life; that is Sin – the word with the “I” in the middle.

The Biblical diagnosis is that human societies have conflicts generated by tensions between serving self and serving others.

In the West this selfishness makes itself felt by the scramble to accumulate wealth.

In Africa it makes itself felt through jealousy and witchcraft.

How do both cultures achieve stability and quality of life given the tensions and conflicts caused by sin?

Both cultures try to keep selfishness in check in different ways.

But the Gospel is the antidote to selfishness (See Philippians 2) and therefore both societies need the Gospel.

● Jim's Problems

The problem: When Africa comes into contact with the West they see it as a "Hunter-Gatherer" problem. They will accept this wealth and consider the spirit world to have smiled on them – they don't see wealth as a product of an aptitude to exploit a rule driven ordered world. The result is that Western wealth can destabilize African relationships. The prosperity gospel prospers.

Here at Yala they are mystified by the white man who seems to have no money – for which read "seems to be cursed". Jim's Journal June 2004, P8

Unlike the West Africans are a humble people who have no pride issues with accepting providence. Therefore their view of the West as a source of resources means that Africans have no issues with becoming dependent on its resources.

African Christianity resourced by the West becomes bound up with materialism.

In African indigenous churches Christianity becomes bound up with animism.

A crude attempt at grafting Western industrial ways on Africa often fails to take off: Vital cultural and infra structural components missing when trying to graft western ways onto Africa; The "parts list" for a Western project to become self sustaining is may be incomplete, simply because Westerners fail to see missing parts that they take for granted. In particular the western mindset is missing: The need to ask the question "Does it work?", rather than "Am I offending a spirit?"

When Westerners are in partnership with Africans who have an eye on Western resources, Westerners don't see the full African mindset, but only what Africans think Westerners want to hear; the Africans are, after all, anxious to secure those sought after resources.

8. Jim's Response: Vulnerable Mission

...that there should be some missionaries from the West whose ministries are conducted in the language of the people being reached, without use of outside financial subsidy.

It says “wait a minute, let's see what's going on here first”

It respects and dignifies African Culture.

It invites Africans to solve their own problems.

It circumvents the negativity of Westerners always having to say “No” to African practices.

It avoids destabilization of relationships between Africans when Western resources are introduced

It avoids the dependency culture.

It avoids the ultimate failure of Western methods to graft onto African culture due to “missing parts”.

It helps to reveal and release the real African mind.

It depends on the Gospel making its own way into the African psyche.

It acknowledges that the core problem is less an inability to industrialize than it is “Sin”- a problem common to both Western and African cultures.

It subverts the excesses of animism from the inside via the Gospel.

However, it has proved hard, but with some highlights – see JJ June 2004, p 8.

9. Questions

- Should the west stop resourcing Africa altogether? Is this possible?
- What combination of Mission work should be adopted: A) VM only? B) A combination of VM and Western resourced mission? C) Only Western resourced mission?
- Is the African way purely cultural and ultimately be “educated” out of its animism just as the West emerged from the Middle Ages?
- Should we just accept that Africa will always be dependent? - that is, that it will always require resourcing and managing by the industrialized world?
- Should we just accept that Africa will always be a low productivity continent?
- If the west can’t resource Africa what does it have to give it?
- How hard should we sell the concept of a purely mechanical world that can be exploited at will without let nor hindrance of spirits, given its downside of fuelling epistemic arrogance and death of God theology?
- What has happened to the world of spirits and witchcraft in the West? Has its power gone?
- Can we learn from Africa about how to make sense of our own Western indigenous churches & movements) who are closer to the animistic mindset than the mainstream denominations (e.g, Jesus Army, Potters House, Benny Hinn...)
- Language issues: No “word for word” translation. Jim’s Football and Cricket illustration:
 - Cricket Ball Football
 - Stumps Goal
 - Catch Hand ball ... this doesn’t look as though it’s working!
 - Bat ?????? ... it’s definitely not working.
- Language issues: Is it right to identify God with the preliterate Supreme Being?
- Language issues: How far can Christianity come to terms with the connotations of animism embodied in the word “spirit”? (e.g. ancestral spirits)

- Language issues: Jim says: *We have “chira”, which is like a curse, but often confused for AIDS. Look at the Biblical understanding of curse, and how such could be 'confused for' AIDs.*
- Language issues: Jim says: *Brother (owadwa), which in East Africa includes distant cousins, and more. How does that affect Biblical interpretation?*
- Language issues: Jim says: *God (Nyasaye), is in the West understood like the manager of a company, but in Africa more as a force. How does that affect one's understanding of the Bible and one's Christian life?*
- Language issues: Jim says: *Life (ngima), in the UK is something mostly that you have or don't have. In African languages, you can have more or less of it. It is more like 'health', or 'prosperity'. How does that affect one's understanding of the Bible and one's Christian life?*

10. Notable references in Jim’s Journals and Emails.

Email May 2002: Africans to theology if either it concerns the chasing away of demons or is backed by Western resources. An example of bewitchment

JJ Feb 2003: Legio Maria Church. P10: missing infrastructure and cultural resources

JJ May 2003: The failure of “Inglis” to capture the deep African animistic mindset

Email June 2004: Development only works if the dead are looked after.

JJ June 2004: P7: Don’t attack regard for the power of the dead. P8: The cursed penniless Whiteman (i.e. Jim Harries!)

JJ Dec 2004: Mechanism versus Magic.

Email March 2005: Bribery and Corruption

Email April 2005: Open air church picks up spiritual power from the wind.

Email May 2006: Strange questions from students. African attitude to surplus resources.

Email June 2006: Europeans fail to understand the African’s concern for spirits.

