Intercultural Generosity in Christian Perspective: 
the ‘West’ and Africa

By Jim Harries

This is version 2, the version that was submitted to the publishers, that was subsequently published as:


Abstract

Western dualism’s tendency to naturalism at times appears to do away with a need for God. African monism’s co-identification of material and spiritual profoundly affects presupposed aspects of Western reality, such as notions of holiness. Enormous misinformation arising from the global hegemony of Western languages conceals important complexities of African life from view to planners of mission and development. Particularly in focus is the centrality of feast and celebration in Africa’s economic and social life. Current efforts at exporting useful dualistic principles to Africa may be building on a misguided foundation. The current downward spiral of misinformation and the resulting confused practice can best be arrested by a reconsideration of biblical injunctions to generosity in the light of realities brought to light through sufficient vulnerability to non-Western contexts.

Introduction

Questions of generosity loom large in today’s materially extremely unequal world. The current massive divide in which a few nations’ people control vast amounts of material wealth while many others struggle to emerge from abstract poverty, seems grossly unjust. A widespread response to such perceived injustice is a practice of redistribution often engaged voluntarily by wealthy people and nations through means of donations of many kinds to the poor. Such donations are in the Western world often considered justified on the basis that they are ‘free gifts’ and nothing is required in return. The notion of free gift seems to be a strongly Christian one. The advisability of this system of giving gifts is questioned by those who point to deleterious side effects, and the use of gifts as a means both of destabilising communities and acquiring control and power.

This article re-evaluates apparent scriptural imperatives. The critique made in this article of the above ‘charitable’ processes is rooted in a deep familiarity with ‘actual’ practice in communities outside of the West. Grass-roots events are interpreted in the light of extant but often relatively invisible African ontological, linguistic, philosophical and cultural norms.

Relationship of Spiritual and Material

Some foundational presuppositions that underlie traditional African thinking can seem incredible to Westerners brought up on a diet of secularism. In theory at least, the British Government curriculum of compulsory schooling that children passed through in the 1970s and 1980s (and presumably the same still applies today) was rooted in assumptions often identified with science. One of those assumptions is that of cause and effect; every material effect is said to have a physical cause. The fact that this is difficult to follow through
absolutely and so is held by faith\(^1\) has not prevented it from being a largely unquestioned foundational supposition throughout mainstream academia.

In contemporary Western ways of thinking, the spiritual and the material are seen as distinct and different. This belief is often known as realism, or dualism. In some cases, especially in some scholarship, the spiritual has been promoted into oblivion; one’s spiritual beliefs and practices are considered to be a private affair that is of no relevance to public life. Hence roles traditionally played by God and by religion are supposedly filled by objective scholarship.

This view is in many respects incomprehensible to traditional Africa. Logical objections to the assumed separation of material and spiritual, such as the implication that there can therefore be no free will\(^2\), that are quietly ignored and pasted over in the West, are prominent in African thinking. That is to say, in African thinking a person who is driven by something in the spiritual realm is capable of being an 'ultimate cause'; they can have a material impact. A person can, for example, halt increases in entropy, reduce the amount of chaos in a system, or counteract the second law of thermodynamics.\(^3\) The separation between material and spiritual that is a cornerstone to Western thinking being taken as close to nonsense in implicit African thinking has its consequences for African culture and ways of life.

Being written in English and aimed at Western academia, we want in this article to articulate some aspects of African beliefs and practices related to the question of generosity in a way that Westerners can grasp them. This is difficult for many Africans to do, either because they do not well understand their Western colleagues, or because they are very careful not to ‘bite the hand that feeds them’. It is often (rightly) said that in Africa the sacred is not clearly distinguishable from the profane. This means that everything is sacred. That is to say that – every material object is also spiritual. To use Tempels’ terminology – everything has its force (Tempels 1959:51). Therefore there cannot be the material without the spiritual.

It is less often realised that the reverse also applies. That is to say: as one cannot have the material without the spiritual, so one cannot have the spiritual without the material. That the spiritual must, in Africa, be expressed in the material, is insufficiently realised by many scholars. Western Christians are too busy ‘telling African people off’ for making this link: telling them not to do prosperity gospel and not to do cargo cult. To many African people such prohibition makes no sense. To many African people – the notion that there may be a spiritual body or force that has no physical manifestation can sound like gibberish. To them, all is one. In other words, they are monists, and not dualists. As a result aspects of prosperity Gospel, as the West knows it, are implicit to African Christianity.

If everything that is material is also spiritual, and everything that is spiritual is also material, then everything that is sacred is also profane. The full implications of this feature of African thinking are often insufficiently realised. In effect this means that in Africa

---

1 What was the initial or ultimate cause? How is it then that humans have free will?

2 “The classic problem of free will is to reconcile an element of freedom with the apparent determinism in a world of causes and effects, a world of events in a great causal chain” (http://www.informationphilosopher.com/freedom/problem/).

3 Without going into detail on these three, suffice it to say, that according to the dualistic worldview a closed system should move towards a state of having more entropy and more chaos.
holiness is understood differently to the way that it is understood in the West. Mojola (2003) noted this with respect to the Luyia dialects of Kenya. Nothing is holy, in the Western sense, because there is nothing that fails to be profane. That is to say; there is no distinct spirituality that creates a separation from the material world we are in. Tempels articulates the same by telling us of the Bantu people (Ogot applies the same to Nilotes 1999:6) that “force is being, being is force” (Tempels 1959:51). “All acquisitions bring an increase of vital force” Tempels tells us, of the Bantu (1959:100). For the Bantu: “the worst evil – and indeed the only real injustice – is the harm done to the vital force” (Tempels 1959:144). The closest Bantu (African) term to translate ‘holy’ in English can therefore be said to be ‘has a lot of vital force’, i.e. health and wealth. This belief has major implications for the ways in which Christianity is understood and lived in Africa.

The above-described features of African understanding are occluded through the widespread use of European languages in Africa. The use of, say, English in much of Africa occludes local truths from wider view to the English-speaking world in various ways, including that:

1. It allows and encourages a foreign agenda to displace local agendas.
2. Translation into English transforms impacts and meanings of discourses.

The above two factors have such a vast impact that it is incredible that there be so many people (from the West) involved in intervention into Africa who take so little notice of them. We will illustrate our point here with examples. It is important to note that many of the examples of physical activities that we use below result in a dynamic that sets up mystical forces:

- ‘I will volunteer’ can be translated into Dholuo (a language of Western Kenya. The people are the Luo, and their language is Dholuo) as ‘abiro chiwora’. Yet, whereas volunteering has the implicature (i.e. implication) of offering one’s services without recompense, chiwruok (including chiwruko nono; giving oneself freely) implies an expectation of a reward in return for services offered.

- To mosne ng’ato is to enter into a complex contract in which an animal is loaned to someone else in return for a change in the dynamics of the mysterious forces of life. In English it can appear that an animal has simply been given as a gift.

- Nyombo in Dholuo is often translated as ‘marriage’ in English. The latter term fails to communicate the complexity of gift exchanges and mutual obligations involved in Luo nyombo.

- The fact that payment for an injustice done is likely to be demanded in terms of an animal, such as a cow or bull, may be totally missed when ‘chulo’ is translated into English as ‘pay’.

- Certain tasks, such as mudding of a house that is best done by a large group of people, require community members to participate. Those community members are not paid, but it is expected that food be provided for them to eat when they work. The general obligation to help another community member on another occasion is presupposed.
• The English term *community* is misleading because it implies participation only of the living in an activity. *Communities* in much of Africa include the dead and the not-yet born.

• In the Kenyan Luo community, for example, a younger brother marrying (i.e. *nyombo*) before his older brother sets up a complex dynamic in the spiritual realm (and therefore implicitly also in the material realm) that is way out of sight of the typical native-English speaker.

• The role of *jater* or a widow-inheritor being largely unknown in many communities of native English speaking people, conceals the key role that he plays in Luo ways of life. Such concealment is further strengthened when native English-speaking people ignore this role.

• One’s afterbirth being buried outside one’s mother’s rural home dictates the location of one’s eventual burial, in a way that is way off the radar screen in native-English.

Examples of the agenda being usurped by foreigners and local agendas being ignored are so consistent as almost to need no mention. Whether it is the Millennium Development Project, Western missionaries, donors or foreigners concerned for justice of all sorts: these people invariably come with their own agendas. Even if they endeavoured to discover the local agenda it would quite likely not make sense as they do not have the language/cultural skills to grasp it (as per above). The very presence of a Westerner, given local people’s long history of interacting with them and their reputation for funding whatever they want to do, can determine the operative agenda even before outsiders have opened their mouths.

**The Generation of Mystical Forces**

We will in this section and subsequently draw heavily on Marcel Mauss’ small book called *The Gift* (1967). We advise readers to carefully study this text, and some of the many commentaries written on it. Mauss, an anthropologist, endeavoured to open a vista of understanding of what was going on in non-western societies to scholarly Western view. We here attempt to apply Mauss’ insights to African communities. This is not to say that we have fully and accurately grasped and even less can totally effectively communicate what is going on in Africa. At least we have made an endeavour below.

Mauss makes implicit reference to a kind of balance sheet. We could say that on this 'balance sheet' material is on one side and spiritual on the other. Yet that would be an over-simplification, because the two categories are not distinct for monistic people. It is important to note that the balance sheet is drawn up with a lot of uncertainty. Some of this uncertainty arises because value is hard to determine and can fluctuate.

I illustrate unpredicatability of value or fortune using two examples. The first, of a Taoist farmer, illustrates how apparent changes in fortune may not be what they appear. The second demonstrates the ambiguity involved in an apparently simple delivery of a sack of food.

1. This farmer had only one horse, and one day the horse ran away. The neighbours came to condole over his terrible loss. The farmer said, ‘What makes you think it is so terrible?’ A month later, the horse came home--this time bringing with her two beautiful wild horses. The neighbours became excited at the farmer's good fortune.
Such lovely strong horses! The farmer said, "What makes you think this is good fortune?" The farmer's son was thrown from one of the wild horses and broke his leg. All the neighbours were very distressed. Such bad luck! The farmer said, "What makes you think it is bad?" A war came, and every able-bodied man was conscripted and sent into battle. Only the farmer's son, because he had a broken leg, remained. The neighbours congratulated the farmer. "What makes you think this is good?" said the farmer.4

2. A sack of food appears to have a certain value; but perhaps for the recipient it is not quite the right kind of food, or it has gone off. Someone may give a gift of a sack of food, but it be stolen from the recipients on their way home. Once the food has been taken 'over there', it is impossible to know what happens to it and how. Perhaps one of a man's two wives will take what he has been given into her home and deny the other wife. Any number of such incidents and circumstances can thus render such payment ineffective.5

Somewhere in ancient history people realised that the giving of gifts (or payments) is an activity fraught with problems – a few of which we have mentioned here. Yet people desired relationship with others, and it was difficult to develop relationship, let's say 'spiritual bonds' with others, without some kinds of material exchange. Part of the necessity for exchange arises from a foundational rule of all human societies: that of the prohibition of incest. The latter rule forced different groups of people to enter into relationship, if only in order to procure wives.6 The question of how to and what to exchange for a wife loomed large. The solution to this and other related difficulties came to be the feast or celebration.

Feasts/celebrations begin and end in restricted time. Because they are time limited, people can afford to set that time aside in order to be together. The invitation to a feast is to the whole group. Non-attendance is strongly discouraged, sometimes by the accusation that someone who does not attend is a witch. Any disputes over quality of food or service can be discussed and agreed up front at the celebration with everyone present and the evidence (for example the food) still right in front of people. As a result of the above, one of the ways, and it was found to be often the best way to give to pay off an obligation (even a vague obligation) of return is to arrange a feast. An added bonus of course is that most people greatly enjoy being part of a gathered crowd with associated activities (wedding, funeral, other celebration) terminating in a slap up meal.7 If it is not feasting it is fighting Mauss implies (1967:3)! Shamala echoes the same principle; participation in a feast/celebration is a way of showing that one does not want “to destroy it” (2008:135). What a choice – let's go for the feast!

Big feasts are put on by big men. Smaller feasts are put on by those less well endowed. Being invited to a feast is a legitimised snooping of someone else's homes and property. It is bound to engender competition. What a wonderful way to remove the drudgery from life – to be always preparing to attend or put on a feast designed to impress, pull a crowd, bring fellowship, cement relationship, exchange women, commemorate major events, and rejoice

4 Cited by: http://www.noogenesis.com/pineapple/Taoist_Farmer.html
5 We learn from Maranz that in Africa a giver is responsible for a gift until it is consumed and so is not considered to have paid it until the receiver has received the appropriate utility (Maranz 2001:157-158).
6 In some African societies it is traditional for wives to be ‘kidnapped’ by force apparently to avoid this issue, this is known as meko in the language of the Kenyan Luo, but even if this should happen it is still expected that bride-wealth be paid.
7 Someone who initially did not enjoy this would have to learn to enjoy it.
in life. Better a challenge to a feast and all the entertainment entailed than a challenge to participate in a fight and massacre!

At a feast, friendships are struck up, witches are identified, and the crowd feels good and blessed. The event may be marked for the purpose of forgetting (such as a funeral), for cementing and public approval of a new relationship (a wedding) or for some other purpose. The relative extravagance of feasts determines a kind of social pecking order that is embellished into the minds and understanding of the whole community. Generosity gets one higher up the pecking order. All this is enabled with an absolute minimisation of the endless hazards and traps (mentioned above) associated with other forms of giving. What a wonderful way of enabling a ‘big man’ to see gain in terms of personal prestige through the use of his wealth to feed many.

The occasion of a feast is an example of how the material and the spiritual intermingle in an indeterminable apparent confusion. The gods may be as pleased as the people. They also are given their share. (We do not have space in this article to go into the issue of animal sacrifice in detail. See Henaff (2010:181) for an example of where this is addressed.) It could be noted that ‘experts’ in interpreting this kind of mass interaction of the material and physical with the spiritual are the old – especially old men. The forces involved at a feast are not amenable to precise measure. Old men have attended feasts the most often, and so can make the most educated guesses. Almost everyone, especially older women, are likely to be speculating. The difficulty of quantifying the forces means that the powers involved are truly mysterious. Such mystery is totally beyond precise definition, but the effects of these forces are everywhere seen resulting in differential prosperity, sometimes calamity, sometimes blessing, and the forming, breaking, re-forming, reinforcing and changing of numerous inter-personal relational dynamics.

We must mention in passing that the above-described solution to inter-human relationships is not very compatible with ‘modern’ or ‘liberal’ ways of life. In many ways – it could be considered to be diametrically opposed. The absence of calculation, the role of big men, the relative neglect of the weak and less able (the sick, women, children, the handicapped) grate strongly with modern calculated individualistic social services that Western people these days advocate. The two are in a sense totally inimical. The system of payment-by-feasts, if we can call it that, could be considered to be enemy number one of modern social service provision. This makes it the enemy of many aid and development projects. It is into this system that resources supposedly designated for other purposes are constantly being ‘misappropriated’ by a process known as corruption. (A widespread euphemism for corruption in East Africa is ‘eating money’.) The system runs on debt – borrowing and delayed repayment is very much the norm. Big men (sometimes known as fat cats) rise from one level of notoriety to another. On the other hand, this system is better than fighting and war. It functions without complex administration, literacy, written records, money and bureaucracy. In addition it can be said to be a very exciting system that does go a long way (although not as far as modern Westerners would like) towards meeting the needs of the poor, who of course are welcomed to the feasts.

The donation of a gift is like an announcement of a feast. Essentially this must be so, because a gift would not be given without a feast. This begins to throw light on many of the problems faced by Westerners if they give gifts (i.e. aid or some kind of assistance) without realising this. In addition to the feast itself being a ‘gift’, other gifts should be handed over in the course of a feast and through means of a feast. This ensures that the gift is publicly known and in that sense officially ratified.
Giving, Generosity, and the Powers

That material gifts or contributions and mystical powers are integrally linked is not always realised by Westerners intervening in Africa. True to the dualistic basis of their thinking they want to knock a wedge between the two. The wedge finds no crevice through which to divide! Physical, material or financial involvement in a community then is spiritual involvement. It is the degree of one's awareness of such spiritual involvement that may be in question, and not the involvement itself. The less aware someone is, the greater the risk that they are unknowingly doing damage.

This inherent link found in Africa between the material and the spiritual should take us back to the philosophical drawing board. If the West is indeed benefitting from what their dualistic approach enables such as science, that raises the question of how the non-West, Africa being our case study, is going to be enlightened regarding this 'superior' philosophical stand? Western dualism is not ‘correct’ in absolute terms (see below). Yet it could be argued that a lot of the modernism from the West that many African people very much desire is rooted in dualism/realism. This suggests that dualism should be introduced to Africa whether it is in absolute terms ‘correct’ or not. The swamping strategy currently being employed – try to swamp African with Western things and Western languages – may however yet fail to provide such a bridge from monism to dualism.

The prominence of post-modernism in the West has more and more demonstrated that dualism is not the universal truth waiting for everyone to find it. Rather, it is simply one of many in ultimate terms possible understandings that people might have of life. The truth of dualism is certainly not written into the ‘nature of things’; it is more like an educated guess. We are not the only ones stating this. While a full investigation of his claim is beyond the scope of this essay, comments by Ware (1995) are helpful. According to Ware, some orthodox theologians were as early as the 14th century already aware that certain peculiarities of Western theology could take some people from the Western church into a secular godlessness (Ware 1995:92). Dualistic philosophy has arisen, according to Ware, from the taking of some inappropriate philosophical positions in the history of the Western church. Unlike the Western church, "Christian Orthodoxy repudiates dualism in all its forms" (1995:46). The East never shared the West’s position on this. Not everyone who has put their faith into objectivity and science has realised that what they are believing is based on a relatively ‘arbitrary’ and arguably misplaced Christian theological position. Unlike Western theologians, orthodox theologians in the East say God is in everything in the form of his energies, even if not in his essence. God according to the orthodox position then is not a clockmaker who wound up the machine then left. He is fully present in everything and in all that happens in the world (Ware 1979:45). By implication; secularism and all that it has brought with it has according to orthodox theologians arisen as a consequence of theological error.

We do not have time here to consider in more detail how the West has managed to escape the 'trap' of the understanding that says that all things have forces, which is common in Africa. We want to emphasise below that the giving of resources in Africa is no uncomplicated task. We can mention just a few aspects of this complexity here – like the tip of an iceberg illustrating what is also much more present at greater depth.

Western visitors to Africa often want to be generous to the poor people they've been seeing on their TV screens and who they are now meeting. So then, a widow comes along asking
for financial help. The Westerners give her £50.00. Hearing this, another widow comes and shares of her woes; they decide she deserves £100.00. A third widow comes and her story sounds much less convincing so they only give her £20.00. They have now made themselves the judge between widows. When those widows go back and report to their families and compare notes ("how much did you get?") you can be sure that the visitors have planted dissension, envy, and strife in the community.

We must remember that in much of Africa a gift is not to be refused (Maranz 2001:107, compare Mauss 1967:18). A gift therefore is an imposition. But a gift also never comes without strings. In a patron/client society, as is present in much of Africa, giving a gift is staking a claim to the position of ‘patron’. Such a position requires a kind of subservience on the part of the client. Most if not all Westerners who enter into such a relationship with African people do not understand what they are letting themselves in for. It is like they are signing a contract without having read the contents. To say "no" to a request is difficult in much of Africa. It is especially difficult in response to a request from one's patron. Thus giving precludes honest sharing on the part of the receiver. Instead receivers feel obliged to tell the givers what they want to hear.

Underlying all of the above and especially defining of gifts in Africa is their mystical content. While also there in some sense in Western nations though rarely given this label, the mystical ties referred to by Mauss as *hau* (1967:8) are very dominant on the African scene. For example, a boy's giving a school girl a gift is much more likely to be seen by her as putting her under obligation to return a sexual favour than would be the case in the UK (Kaufman and Stavrou 2004). Jealousy is a very powerful force in Africa. This could be demonstrated by numerous means. By way of example; Prah tells us how Afro-Americans will pull down a member of their own community who seems to be getting ahead (Prah 2006:153). The same Afro-Americans have less of a problem if a member of another ethnicity gets ‘ahead’ of them, i.e. acquires more wealth (material and spiritual) than they have. Other people seem to be less strongly egalitarian than are Africans amongst themselves. A further implication of this is that African people are especially likely to be offended and to respond with powerful jealousy often expressed in witchcraft, if they discover that a colleague has received a gift that they feel he or she does not deserve (Harries 2012a).

**The Compassion Dilemma**

There are people who believe that the best if not the only means of sharing the love of Christ with the poor in Africa is through extraordinary financial and material generosity. They assume that this will result in people becoming Christian. At the same time, parts of Tanzania that are now the most keenly Islamic, are those where Arab slave traders were the most active (for example Kondoa and Tabora). Taking slaves and giving gifts are clearly rather different ways of spreading one's religion! It appears that Islam has been adopted not because Muslims have been generous in giving handouts, but because of Islam’s fit with traditional African patriarchal systems. When Christianity is adopted because of material benefits accruing, this is called the prosperity gospel, and the resultant believers are called rice Christians.

Westerners do not, in my experience, ‘donate generously’ at home in the way they do when they reach Africa. Rather – in their home contexts and amongst their own people they can be very wise with their use of resources. For example, it is very widely accepted in the West that it is of value to maintain a distinction between business associates and
personal friends. People like to take their true friends from those who are not materially dependent on them (Maranz 2001:66). Systems have been devised, enabled by sophisticated record-keeping structures and rigorous following of bureaucratic procedures, through which care for the less able is institutionalised (for example government aid for the seriously sick). Because the poor in Western nations are caught by many government safety nets, they do not need to depend on the charitable whim of wealthy patrons. That is in short – the poor are cared for through other-than the kinds of activities of patrons that Westerners engage in when they reach Africa that were mentioned earlier in this article. A government-instituted tax on the wealthy for distribution to the poor, for all its foibles, avoids many of the problems associated with spontaneous charitable as well as doing away with the dependency of the poor on feasts and celebrations put on by others. It enables a degree of predictability in the distribution of wealth that goes way beyond that of the traditional system of celebrations and feasts found in Africa. We have argued elsewhere that Africa does have a kind of taxation system that services wealth distribution that operates through fear of witchcraft (Harries 2012b:50). We have now found that this is much connected to the holding of feasts.

The reason Westerners revert to becoming beneficiaries and patrons on contacting 'poor' communities are probably quite clear. Someone accustomed to the material living standards of Western nations can be horrified by what they find in Africa, India, and other regions of the majority world. Conditions for certain people can be so diabolical by comparison with standards that are kept 'back home' that they let-rip in massive, but unfortunately often poorly thought out, generosity. Contributing to this of course has been the failure of many Third World governments to institute the kinds of safety nets found in Western nations. Often considered to be due to corruption, we have found in this article that this is related to people’s being deeply habituated to the system of feasts and celebrations finding it very hard to adopt rationalised bureaucratic and institutionalised government based wealth-redistribution systems.

The system seems to have gone into a vicious circle, if not a downward spin! The problems of ill-thought-out charity are well known: dependency, passive compliance, so-called corruption, ('Corruption' is often in reality the interpretation of an institutionalised regulated distribution system as if it is a patron-client system of feasts and celebrations governed by mystical forces.) rice Christians, abuses of all sorts. What might be turning a vicious circle into a downward spin – is the fact that the people whose advice is sought regarding the operation of a safety net are the very patrons who are heavily invested into the traditional system of rewards. This writing is aimed at Europeans, whose individual and collective charity is supporting millions in Africa who would otherwise sink into poverty. The very people finding themselves hanging on the thread of Western charity are the ones consulted regarding the advisability of the continuation of the current system. Compliance has been acquired by (Western) people who seem not to have realised that clients always and invariably want to comply.

The above misunderstandings are compounded by the linguistic issue already alluded to above. European languages such as English being used in 99.9% of international communication makes the northern or western agenda extremely dominant. This process is increasing as the encroachment of electronic globalised communication systems increasingly tells non-Westerners not only to use the European languages, but also how to use them in a European way, regardless of the truth on the ground. Illich describes this as “the dead, impersonal rhetoric of people paid to declaim with phony conviction texts composed by others” (1980). In parts of Black Africa people of European and North
American origin can be revered like gods. The existence of such massive blocks to free communication is often not even recognised or acknowledged by researchers; formal or informal.

Generosity is laudable. It is important to consider how, in the light of real extant conditions, it is to be expressed. Blind generosity can be extremely destructive. At the very least, there needs to be a means to enable clear feedback to the donor bodies. Many of the factors mentioned above make this very unlikely in much of Africa. Hence we propose that there is a desperate need for the West to acquire eyes and ears that can render its actions intelligent to real contexts that are not always interpreted by people (and/or extended families) who are grossly dependent on the charitable practices being evaluated. Certainly in the case of Africa – cultural and racial divides these days coincide enormously with the divide between rich and poor. There is a desperate need for Westerners who are not obfuscated by the linguistic and cultural difficulties involved in trying to cross the divide. That is, for Westerners to relate to folks in the poor world using the languages of the latter, on a basis other than as a donor or representative of a donor. This is what we are calling vulnerable mission (vulnerablemission.org).

**Christian Response to Aid**

When considering Christian responses to contemporary aid practices, we need to consider both theoretical teaching and practice. Some Scriptural teachings seem to advocate the kind of global-scale generosity that underlies aid today. Passages people would point to might include John the Baptist's instruction in Luke 3:11 to share what we have with those who lack. James 2:14-17 and 1 John 3:17 seem to Westerners to strongly suggest something of the nature of modern day aid and charitability. On the other hand, the response of sending aid following Agabus’ prediction of a famine throughout the Roman world (Acts 11:28), was to help the brothers/elders in Judea (Acts 11:29-30). In 1 Corinthians 16:1-4 Paul gives specific instructions for a collection to be made to be taken to Jerusalem. This collection is presumably the one to be taken to ‘the poor’ mentioned in Galatians 2:10. ‘The poor’ is most likely a reference to the Apostles in Jerusalem.8

While some orthodox teaching may be in favour of ‘generosity’, we find little if any orthopraxis resembling the kinds of aid activities that the West is engaging with ‘the rest’ today. There is no evidence, for example, that Paul's collection for Jerusalem was ever handed over. The collection certainly had other than charitable aims; it was to give “concrete expression to Jewish and Gentile Christian’s common sharing in the spiritual heritage of Israel” (Wedderburn 1988:40). Although Agabus’ prediction was that there would be major hunger in all regions (Acts 11:28) the response of the disciples was to send help only to the brothers in Jerusalem (Acts 11:29). The major questions we should perhaps ask concern Jesus himself. While there were surely many hungry people in the world in Jesus’ time, he chose to help very few of them. Jesus did not make fundraising trips to Rome, or anywhere else that we are aware of. Much confusion seemed to follow Jesus' feeding of the five thousand, which he did by use of miracle and not through fundraising (John 6).

---

8 There has been a lot of discussion regarding the nature of this collection. Georgi tells us that “when addressing the Jesus believers of Jerusalem as the ‘poor’ or the ‘saints’, Paul was only pointing to their own eschatological self-understanding” (1992:17-18). For Paul, “the collection was a tax demanded by the leaders of the Jerusalem church corresponding to the traditional Jewish temple tax” (Georgi 1992:17-18). There is no evidence in the Scriptures of the tax having been accepted. According to Wedderburn this tax “was spurned by Jewish Christians” (1988:41).
Perhaps this is because, as we learn from Luke 4:3-4, Jesus' ministry was not going to be about feeding people.

Jesus is recorded as performing various miracles of helping and healing. To take him as setting the precedent for the kinds of interventions the West is engaging these days is however a bit of a stretch. The difficulties with such extension of Jesus’ example include:

1. There are people Jesus did not heal – such as the beggar at the beautiful gate mentioned in Acts 3:1-2.9

2. Jesus performed miracles whereas moderns want to bring change using science. The former draws directly on the power of God. The latter creates dependency on the West.

3. Jesus’ teachings were all aimed at people with a limited goods worldview regarding neighbours and colleagues. The massive capitalist machinery that supports Western charity today, which was not there at the time, can result in a very different dynamic and impact.

4. Languages were in Jesus’ day primarily oral and spread by people. Hence they were learned within their human context. Today languages are often learned from mass-produced books and electronic machines. This results in languages loosing many of their moorings in their original living cultures. (See Illich 1980 for more details.)

5. It is widely acknowledged that the times of Jesus and the apostles were in some ways unique. Records of those times are incorporated into the now closed canon, for a certain purpose (John 20:30-31).

and so on.

Jesus, it appears, walked a fine line between doing sufficient signs to make his point, but not so many miracles as to have people follow him for the wrong reason. Had he been more generous with his miracles surely less people would have abandoned him (after his ascension Jesus seemed to remain with only 120 close followers (Acts 1:15 and 2:1))? Had he fed more people – he might have had more consistent followers and he might not have got crucified.

Jesus communicated the mind of God the Father (John 8:28). He was not a man-pleaser. He was the truth. Because he was the truth, and is the truth (Sweet and Viola 2010:137) some were not pleased with him. Such did not result in Jesus faltering from his declaring of truth, even when it cost him his life. Truth was his concern more than ‘generosity’. So should it be for missionaries today.

Mauss considers the possibility of ‘free gifts’. Supposedly “voluntary, disinterested and spontaneous [gifts] … are in fact obligatory and interested” says Mauss (1967:1). Any gift is, according to Mauss, always given with some sort of strings attached; an expectation of repayment, even be it indirect. Yet we believe that, contrary to Mauss, Jesus did bring a free gift (Matthew 10:8). In fact – Jesus is a free gift, presented by God to undeserving

---

9 This man was crippled from birth and was being carried to the temple daily (Acts 3:2). Presumably this means that he was there during the time Jesus was ministering.
people (while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8)). This message from God has deeply and profoundly affected those who have become followers of Jesus or Christians. So much so that Christians have believed in the institution of ‘free gifts’ and have desired to give free gifts to others. This kind of thinking we take as underlying the practice of international and intercultural aid up to today; Christians who have received a free gift of Jesus Christ wanting to express their grateful worship to God by extending the same to others. It seems that building aid and development on this foundation has been a non-fitting over extension of the principle of ‘free gift’ to the secular world.

Conclusion

A careful examination of the cultural and religious contexts of majority world recipients (with a focus on Africa) of Western generosity reveals intricacies of behaviour otherwise rarely subjected to either scholarly or popular attention. Rarely considered implications of Western generosity are brought to light as a result.

This article points to ways in which the dualistic West engages with African understandings in which the material and spiritual intermingle in a complex almost indeterminable throng. The hegemony of the use of Western languages in international and intercultural communication is found to be complicit in the obscuring of extant on-the-ground realities. Many implications of the co-identity of material and spiritual in parts of Africa are explored. One of these is the traditional high valuation of feasts and celebrations as contexts for the exchange of gifts, markers in social transactions, and in their role of defining people’s wider material and social life. Grass-root level difficulties associated with receiving aid are articulated. There is a massive global-level miscomprehension arising from a failure to perceive the impact of traditionally defined patron and client roles. A re-examination of the Scriptural basis of compassionate inter-relationship between better and worse off people encourages us to re-think current practices in favour of greater structural humility of Western workers. Such humility that undercuts deeply ingrained presupposed superiority can be achieved when Westerners intervening in Africa refuse the powerful struts of foreign money and languages in their engagement. Underlying many difficulties in aid practices today has been an over-extension and miscomprehension of biblical injunctions to generosity, that is to say; selectivity of the West wanting to benefit from Christian teachings without welcoming the Christian God.

An increase in the amount and depth of engagement of Western people’s in Africa and the non-Western world using local languages and resources is advocated as a key means to the expression of truly Christian and truly generous sharing.

Bibliography


Illich, Ivan, 1980. ‘Vernacular Values.’


