Religious liberties of missionaries under pressure from within

The unsettling nature and the potential of vulnerable approaches to mission

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Abstract: Missionaries' religious freedom is shaped by their ability to conduct ministry appropriately within specific contexts. While legal status plays a role, support structures are equally vital. However, mistrust within the missionary-sender relationship can erode this freedom. 'Vulnerable' mission approaches, where Western missionaries exclusively use local languages and resources, often face suspicion. These approaches challenge conventional norms through subverting the use of global languages like English, allowing local interpretations of Scripture, ministering in ways that are regarded to be at odds with 'holistic' understandings of mission and seeking cross-cultural proximity that can be viewed as unlawful in the West. Nevertheless, embracing vulnerable mission can help 'decolonise' mission and the Church, reducing dependency on the West. Enabling missionaries' ongoing religious liberties by trusting them with – in today's world – unconventional or 'risky' approaches is essential for fostering faith within indigenous communities that is orthodox yet based on their own cultural-linguistic foundations.

Keywords: religious freedom; missionary support structures; local languages; contextual ministry; vulnerable mission

Sammendrag: Misjonærers religionsfrihet formes av deres mulighet til å utøve sin tjeneste på en hensiktsmessig måte i de kontekstene de befinner seg. Her spiller juridisk status en rolle, men misjonærenes støttestrukturer er like viktige. Når det er mistillit i forholdet mellom misjonær og sendeorganisasjon/ menighet kan denne friheten undergraves. "Sårbare" misjonstilnærminger, der vestlige misjonærer utelukkende bruker lokale språk og ressurser, blir ofte møtt med mistenksomhet. Denne type tilnærminger utfordrer konvensjonelle måter å drive misjon ved å undergrave bruken av globale språk som engelsk, tillate lokale tolkninger av Skriften, drive misjon på måter som anses å være i strid med en "holistisk" forståelse av misjon, samt at en søker tverrkulturell nærhet som kan anses som ulovlig i Vesten. Likevel, ved å omfavne "sårbare" tilnærminger til misjon kan en bidra til å "avkolonisere" misjonen og kirken, og en bidrar til å redusere avhengighet av Vesten. Å fortsatt gi misjonærer tillitsbasert religiøs frihet, slik at de kan gjøre bruk av ukonvensjonelle eller "risikable" tilnærminger til misjon, er avgjørende for å fremme en tro blant lokale grupper som både er ortodoks og basert på folkets egne kulturelle og språklige fundament.

Nøkkelord: religionsfrihet, sendeorganisasjoner/ misjonsorganisasjoner, lokale språk, kontekstuell tjeneste, sårbar misjon.

Introduction[1]

While religious liberty has been defined slightly differently in a number of texts and documents,[2] it is clear that the right to freedom extends beyond the choosing of belief. It also includes the manifestation of this "religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance".[3] The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states in its article 18 that this freedom "may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others."[4] Paul Marshall points out that for the violation of religious freedom, it is the result that counts, not the motive of those

1 A version of this paper was presented virtually at the Fjellhaug Symposium on "Mission and Religious Freedom" in Oslo, 20–21 September 2023 under the title "An unexpected threat to the missionary's religious freedom: Why 'vulnerable' approaches to mission can be unsettling for the sending community – and why they are worth the 'risk'".

2 See Paul Marshall, "Conceptual Issues in Contemporary Religious Freedom Research" in *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 6, no. 1/2 (2013), 11; United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), "International Standards for Constitutional Religious Freedom Protections: Recommendations" in *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 4, no. 2 (2011), 129.

3 UN General Assembly, "*Universal Declaration of Human Rights"* (1948), art. 18.

4 United Nations Organisation. *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, 1967, https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/1976/03/19760323%2006-17%20AM/Ch_IV_04.pdf, art. 18.

limiting religious liberty.[5]

When discussing religious freedom or the lack thereof, the focus usually is on societies or societal groupings as they relate either to the state or other religious groups. Another angle from which to approach religious liberty is to look at how mission activities impact on religious freedom and human rights. These have been co-conceptualised in the past, e.g. in The Oslo Coalition's document on 'Mission activities and human rights',[6] or in the subsequent 'Recommendations for conduct' by the World Council of Churches, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the World Evangelical Alliance entitled 'Christian witness in a multi-religious world'.[7] These papers undertook to establish a consensus on what constitutes ethical behaviour in mission practice by churches, organisations or individual missionaries. While seeking to protect the human rights and dignity of those who missionary activity is directed to, these documents also affirmed the right of those pro-active in mission to invite "others to adopt the religion or world view" communicated to them by 'missionaries'.[8]

For the greater part of it, this article takes a different approach. It highlights not so much the duties of (Christian) missionaries with respect to ethical behaviour or the legality of their work but rather their own, actual freedom to do ministry. Marshall notes that religious liberties can be limited *de jure* as well as *de facto*.[9] The former tends to be easy to establish while appraising the latter can be more difficult. This is particularly true when it comes to the support framework that missionaries depend upon to carry out their work. For the purposes of this article and over and above the criteria mentioned earlier, I consider the religious freedom of missionaries to consist of the ability to carry out ministry appropriately in a given context. In this, it resembles academic freedom that is often not solely understood as "[f]reedom from interference" but also as "freedom to engage in appropriate activities".[10] Apart from a legal status (i.e. the *de jure* freedom) which will be considered as well, this liberty also hinges on

5 Marshall, "Conceptual Issues", 12.

6 The Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief, "Missionary Activities and Human Rights: Recommended Ground Rules for Missionary Activities (A Basis for Creating Individual Codes of Conduct)" in *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 3 no. 1 (2010), 113–122.

7 World Council of Churches, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, and World Evangelical Alliance, "Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct: World Council of Churches Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue World Evangelical Alliance" in *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 4 no. 1 (2011), 138–142.

8 The Oslo Coalition, "Missionary Activities", 115.

9 Paul Marshall, "Possible Dimensions of Religious Freedom" in *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 2 no. 2 (2009), 130.

10 Gerlese S. Åkerlind and Carole Kayrooz, "Understanding Academic Freedom: The Views of Social Scientists" in *Higher Education Research & Development* 22 no. 3 (2003), 337.

support structures that are enabling. If they suffer damage, permission or financial support for the work can be withdrawn. Thus, missionaries' ability to continue ministering would be impaired, leading to a *de facto* limitation of their religious freedom.

In particular, this paper will look at the case of 'vulnerable' approaches to mission. In brief, they are defined as ministry practiced by Westerners in majority world contexts exclusively using local people's indigenous languages and resources. As will be shown, they are particularly prone to drawing less-than-enthusiastic support, criticism or full-out resistance. We will consider why and how a missionary's religious freedom can be limited as a result thereof and look at the potential consequences of such limitations. In the last section of the paper, we will concern ourselves with reasons why the freedom of vulnerable missionaries ought to be upheld effectively and what such protection of their freedom would entail.

The background of this paper is a recent ethnographic study of white people's understandings and practices of reconciliation in a multi-ethnic suburban church in post-apartheid South Africa. One key result of the research project was that 'vulnerability' in the above sense – relating to the 'cultural others' on their terms – was sometimes regarded as worth striving for, while the actual practice of it was marginal. One explanation for this was that vulnerability would have undermined some of the core tenets of what this church aimed to be and achieve – including, intriguingly, cultural diversity – which inadvertently led to white people staying in relatively influential positions.[11]

Risky 'vulnerable' approaches to mission

According to the Alliance for Vulnerable Mission (AVM), vulnerable approaches to mission "include but are not limited to carrying out ministry in culturally appropriate ways, refusing a high-status position, learning a local language, and avoiding the use of imported resources in favor of local ones".[12] In my own work, these principles have challenged and inspired me over the years which led to me becoming an active member of the AVM network.

On the one hand, there have been numerous works in recent years that admon-

11 Marcus Grohmann, Seeking Reconciliation in a Context of Coloniality: A Study of White People's Approaches in a Multicultural South African Church. (Re-) Konstruktionen - Internationale Und Globale Studien (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2023), 208 f.

12 Alliance for Vulnerable Mission (AVM). Section "What Is Vulnerable Mission?" www.vulnerablemission.org, accessed 22 August 2023. After an update of their mission statement, the AVM states more concisely that it promotes "living in culturally appropriate ways, using the local language, and relying on local resources in ministry" (accessed 15 August 2024).

ished and exhorted missionaries to follow such or similar practice.[13] The reasons advanced were theological (e.g. referring to the *kenosis* of Jesus as example to follow), ecclesiological (making a case for local ownership and appropriate contextualisation), cultural-linguistic-anthropological (suggesting the need for a deep understanding and appreciation of local realities) as well as sociological (pointing out the risk of outside dominance and unhealthy dependencies, often related to significant funding coming from abroad). The works cited in the footnote each treat several of these aspects.

On the other hand, and such urgent calls – as well as respect – for vulnerability notwithstanding, actually putting vulnerable principles into practice and insisting on them can result in reluctance, suspicion and rejection. The critique comes from various angles, four of which I will explain in more detail now.

Insistence on local languages undermines the power of global languages

It is hard to come by anyone who does not see value in cultural outsiders learning and using an indigenous language. However, particularly in contexts where a 'world language' like English, French or Spanish is widely spoken, undertaking to learn a vernacular language can be regarded as not actually necessary.[14] Not only is the education system often based on former colonial languages. Competence in the *lingua franca* also tends to serve as a status symbol. Thus, foreign missionaries – depending on their ministry context – are at times regarded as welcome resources to hone one's own language skills and climb the social ladder.[15] Local people can appear to not actually require one to learn their languages – sometimes quite the contrary. In contexts like the one I am familiar with in the multilingual South Africa, many 'Western' ministry workers (whether foreigners or South Africans) find themselves in multicultural, English-dominated contexts, where they experience it as a near impossibility to choose – and even more difficult, to learn – one of the numerous home languages of people they are in contact with on a daily basis. Hence, pointing out the need for using local

13 E.g. Craig Greenfield, *Subversive Mission: Serving as Outsiders in a World of Need* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022); Willis Horst, Ute Paul, and Frank Paul (eds.), *Mission without Conquest: An Alternative Missionary Practice* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2015); Jean Johnson, *We Are Not the Hero: A Missionary's Guide to Sharing Christ, Not a Culture of Dependency* (Sisters, OR: Deep River Books, 2012); Andy McCullough, *Global Humility: Attitudes for Mission* (Welwyn Garden City: Malcolm Down Publishing, 2018); Matt Rhodes, *No Shortcut to Success: A Manifesto for Modern Missions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022); Chris Sadowitz and Jim Harries (eds.), *Paul Planted, Apollos Watered, but God: Vulnerable Weakness in Ministry and Mission* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock).

14 Jim Harries, Vulnerable Mission: Insights into Christian Mission to Africa from a Position of Vulnerability (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2011), 248.

15 Jim Harries, Communication in Mission and Development. Relating to the Church in Africa (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 109.

languages in order to effectively minister cross-culturally implicitly challenges the idea that multicultural togetherness can be sought on equal terms using English, a view shared e.g. by this white member of a multiethnic South African church:

> I think the [black] students who come to the church are fairly good in English. They study in English; they write their exams in English. So, I don't think it is too much of a problem to have to contextualise it [i.e. make theological teaching relevant to a certain cultural context; note from the author].[16]

Painstakingly learning and using local languages in such contexts undermines the idea that the English language creates a level playing field for ministry in the multicultural contact-zone. Allowing or even encouraging the use of local languages is then regarded not only as not necessary but as potentially divisive, as expressed by another white member of the same church:

> … as much as the attempt with multilingualism would be to incorporate and make feel welcome, is I think the effect that it's going to have, it's going to segregate, because if some of the Xhosa speaking people in church start speaking Xhosa to each other, I'm going to go and join a group that speaks a language that I can understand. So, you end up alienating yourself rather than getting something to glue together …[17]

Prioritising local languages in theologising can appear as deviating from the truth

One main argument advanced for a more-than-symbolic use of local languages in cross-cultural ministry is that of appropriate theological contextualisation.[18] Languages are more than vocabulary combined with grammar rules; they are inextricably connected with the cultural context in which they are used. Highlighting this reality, Agar introduced the term *languaculture*.[19] It follows that languages have their own systems of categorisation which implies a particular way of perceiving, understanding and responding to reality.

An example would be the term *ukushumayela*, which is commonly taken to be the

16 Grohmann, "Seeking Reconciliation", 184.
17 Grohmann, "Seeking Reconciliation", 120.
18 Harries, "Communication"; Samuel M. Tshehla, Samuel, "'Can Anything Good Come out of Africa?' Reflections of a South African Mosotho Reader of the Bible" in *Journal of African Christian Thought* 5 no. 1 (2002), 15–24.
19 Michael Agar, *Language Shock: Understanding the Culture of Conversation* (New York: William Morrow, [1994] 2002), 60.

isiXhosa-equivalent of 'to preach'.[20] Contrary to preaching, *ukushumayela* often also denotes what in English would be called 'giving testimony' and 'prophesying'. This reality underlay my Xhosa interviewees' experiences in different kinds of isiXhosa-run churches.[21] These either adopted a very strict stance towards the role of women in church ('Since women are not to preach in church gatherings, giving testimony is also not an option') or a very lax one ('Since women naturally participate in church services, e.g. by giving testimonies, they can obviously preach as well'). This contradicted the practice and doctrine of a Reformed Evangelical Anglican denomination in South Africa, one multi-ethnic congregation of which had been my main research site. There, it was insisted that "in terms of 1 Timothy 2:12 it is not permissible for a woman to preach in a Church service".[22] This doctrine had been formulated in and was defended based on English rooted in a Western context. The above case study indicated that this principle can be difficult to uphold in a cultural-linguistic context not sharing the same conceptual assumptions, namely about the nature of 'preaching' – if consideration was given at all to interrogating it interculturally.

The problem is that a doctrine isn't meant to be relative but absolute. It is to define and spell out an aspect of orthodox faith. One of the prime goals of using the vernacular in mission is to enable an inculturation, an appropriate contextualisation of the gospel so that it can speak meaningfully and pertinently into realities that are experienced through particular languacultures. This requires building on indigenous cultural-linguistic foundations because these will offer the categories through which local people will make sense of 'the new'. Inevitably, through navigating the semantic (im)possibilities, the local languaculture will end up guiding the interpretation of Scripture to an extent. Due to the reality of cultural-linguistic differences this will likely result in some doctrinal divergences. To some, this might appear as an unacceptable relativising of truth.

Vulnerable missionaries strive for theologies that prioritise understandings of Scripture that relate closely to local languacultural realities. This is why the learning of and working in vernacular languages is regarded as essential. For those who – despite a general acknowledgment of cultural difference – emphasise the universality of orthodox doctrine, mission strategies that not only result in but envision potentially 'deviant theology' may appear dangerous. Their fear of syncretism may not only result in a lack of support but in an active advocacy against them as exemplified by David B. Garner.[23]

20 Cf. Marcus Grohmann, "From Celebration to Utilisation: How Linguistic Diversity Can Reduce Epistemic Inequalities." *Verbum et Ecclesia* 45 no. 1 (2024), 5.

21 Grohmann, "Seeking Reconciliation", 174 ff.

22 REACH SA. 2014. *Handbook of Procedures*, 17.

23 David B. Garner, "High Stakes: Insider Movement Hermeneutics and the Gospel" in *Themelios* 37 no. 2 (2012), 249–174.

Insisting on local resources undermines 'holistic' ministry

Another way vulnerable approaches to mission can come under fire is for their emphasis on avoiding outside resources in cross-cultural ministry. This does not mean missionaries should not be receiving funds to enable their presence in the field. Rather, the intention is to sidestep power inequalities that result from drawing on resources from outside of the people's own community in ministry contexts. That this leads to positions of vulnerability vis-à-vis people in need becomes clear when considering how easily and how often positions of power are embraced rather than evaded: A missionary's power may have to do with being involved with foreign funding for local projects, offering food, transport-money or the like that could be understood as incentives by locals, giving access to privileged career opportunities, feeding people's hope of social advancement through the opportunity of refining their English, or offering financial assistance in times of distress over and above what the average local person would give. This is not to imply that such vulnerability is to be seen as a general rule for cross-cultural Christian ministry. Rather, the principle of refusing to use outside resources in ministry contexts seeks to carve out a zone in which 'vulnerable' missionaries would experience freedom in relating to people without the many binds and complications brought about by giving access to material resources in or through ministry.[24]

Although unhealthy dependency in mission and development has come to the attention of many in recent years, the above proposal by the AVM in its radicality seems to run counter to the concomitant and ongoing trend towards (re)thinking mission and development in terms of holistic transformation.[25] To completely decline employing material resources in cross-cultural ministry – particularly in contexts of 'poverty' or stark socio-economic inequalities – can quickly be dismissed. This is all the more the case in my current country of residence, South Africa, where in the post-apartheid era theology and development is an established field,[26] and restitution has come to be an expected ingredient both in Christian-based reconciliation[27] and

24 What these complex problems consist of is well-depicted in the chapter "The Immorality of Aid to the 'Third World' (Africa)" in Harries, "Insights", 23-40.

25 Cf. Bryant L. Myers, *Walking With The Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development,* Revised edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011); Brian Woolnough and Wonsuk Ma (eds.), *Holistic Mission: God's Plan for God's People* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2010).

26 Nadine Bowers du Toit, "Church and Development in Africa: Looking Back, Moving Forward" in *Mission as the "Labour Room" of Theology*, edited by Johannes Knoetze (Wellington: CLF Publishers, 2022), 301–314.

27 Christo Thesnaar, "A Pastoral Hermeneutical Approach to Reconciliation and Healing: A South African Perspective" in *Latin America between Conflict and Reconciliation*, edited by Martin Leiner and Susan Flämig, (Göttingen & Bristol, CT: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), 216; Grohmann, "Seeking Reconciliation", 92.

in secular transformation.[28] At best it may appear as going back half a century to the pitting of evangelism against the 'social gospel'. At worst it may be seen as heartless or pretentious, should the refusal to be generous in ministry entail a lifestyle of relative privilege outside the immediate ministry context. Missionaries insisting on such vulnerability in their work may meet incomprehension and struggle to find the necessary support structures for their ministry.

Working through local accountability structures clashes with international safeguarding legislation

The last reason for potential resistance to vulnerable ministry considered here is the increasing exigencies and consequences of international legislation regarding the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse, henceforth referred to as 'safeguarding'. Harries describes and analyses recent British policies on the back of efforts by the United Nations (UN) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) to minimise the risk of 'powerful' international aid and development workers taking advantage of the 'vulnerable' population in Low and Middle Income Countries (LMICs), particularly women and girls.[29] These strategies blanketly assume Western nationals in LMICs to work from positions of power (be it financial, status or otherwise) and require them to submit to accountability structures and safeguarding procedures rooted in European contexts while in their host country.[30] Vulnerable approaches to mission not only purposefully attempt to sidestep common power hierarchies. They also tend to emphasise deep cultural immersion and thus integration in local accountability structures. Being forced to comply with British law while ministering vulnerably in an African country poses a risk to the effectiveness of the missionaries' cross-cultural ministry,[31] and their very safety, as explained by Harries:

> Locally, foreigners raising concerns about sexual misdemeanours by missionaries through insisting that externally-rooted checks be put in place may easily imply that they have evidence that the person concerned has engaged in illicit sexual activity. The impact of such implication could at best be confusing and at worst could result in physical attacks (lynchings) of missionaries and colleagues, or different possibilities between these extremes.[32]

28 Sharlene Swartz, *Another Country. Everyday Social Restitution* (Cape Town: BestRed, 2016).
29 Jim Harries, "Preventing Abuses in the International Aid Sector: A Global Effort, and a British-Based Case Study" in *Global Missiology* 20 no. 3 (2023), 11–20.
30 Harries, "Preventing Abuses", 13.
31 Harries, "Preventing Abuses", 17.
32 Harries, "Preventing Abuses", 11 f.

Blindly enforced safeguarding may therefore render a vulnerable approach to mission a sheer impossibility, turning the legislation into an inadvertent *de jure* limitation of some missionaries' religious freedom, i.e. their ability to carry out ministry appropriately in a given context (see introduction). At the same time, all British institutions like churches who financially support such 'aid workers' are forced to be in compliance with this safeguarding legislation.[33] If missionaries – not for a refusal to be accountable but for recognising that the specific, Eurocentric requirements of accountability are misdirected and potentially harmful – find themselves unable to implement what is stipulated by British safeguarding laws, they can be defunded and even shunned and shamed as alleged violators of safeguarding rules of conduct.[34]

Restricting the ministry possibilities of vulnerable missionaries – a question of human rights?

Although often held in high regard, vulnerable approaches to mission – perhaps for their perceived radicality – do at times elicit critique and resistance. From the above, it appears that one key reason is found in their inherently – if not explicitly – challenging alternative kinds of Christian ministry that try not to evade but to harness or at least embrace linguistic, financial or political power.

Of course, the 'right to freedom of religion' does not prescribe the unanimous support of one's religious practice. It can and it should also be asked to what extent the language of 'rights to freedom' is appropriate for missionaries, especially when they aim at finding ways to "have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (Phil 2: 5b-7, NIV). The fact that 'servant' here could also be translated 'slave', i.e. that Jesus willingly *gave up* his divine rights rather than clinging to or even defending them, requires us to think very carefully whether the *defence* of vulnerable missionaries' rights to religious freedom is indeed acceptable. Even if we consider vulnerable missionaries (and other ministry workers – like all people) to *have* a right to freedom of religion and belief, it would surely be inappropriate if it was *claimed* by individuals from their supporting networks or churches. This would only be testimony to unhealthy relationships and go against the very grain of vulnerability.

Nevertheless, not being adequately supported does of course result in a *de facto* limitation of this freedom of religion of missionaries who in their ministries depend on certain support structures. This limitation may even require them to leave the field. The consequences of this affect not just individual ministry workers but the wider

33 Jim Harries and Marcus Grohmann "Responsible and Contextual: Attending to the Downsides of British Safeguarding Standards in Africa", unpublished manuscript (2024).
34 Harries and Grohmann, "Responsible and Contextual".

Church as well. It concerns both the supporters whose partnership in the gospel and insight into World Christianity might suffer and particularly the receiving communities: Not only are they more likely to miss out on the gospel being shared with them 'vulnerably' – a kind of sharing that would arguably be an appropriate response to the calls of many to 'decolonise' North-South relationships. Settling for non-vulnerable involvement of Westerners in Africa, for instance, could mean to an extent "a 'cutting off' of LMICs from supportive understanding by the wider world".[35]

Why the religious freedom of vulnerable missionaries should be protected

The potential of more widespread, non-vulnerable ministry practices, their achievements and the fact, that God is able to use human weakness *and* strength for His glory of course have to be acknowledged. In the same way, however, the limitations of such approaches need to be recognised. Vulnerable mission through its particular vantage point seems to be exceptionally capable of such recognition. It promises to transcend these limitations by venturing into theological and anthropological territory that for many remains inaccessible. It thus enables those in privileged or powerful positions to explore effective ways of 'decolonising' mission and cross-cultural relationships in the global church and counter ongoing dependency on the West.[36] Its mode is one of bridging the – according to Vähäkangas – *intrinsic* ethnocentrism of systematic or orthodox theology and the "radical openness to the other" of anthropology.[37]

To stay in the picture, let us consider mission to be an activity that is helping people to build bridges over treacherous terrain to find lifegiving, solid ground in Jesus, the Christ, who we learn about in the Scriptures. The way such bridges are built by vulnerable missionaries markedly differs from non-vulnerable approaches to cross-cultural ministries. With the latter, ministry workers bring their own building materials and tools, i.e. what they know as orthodox Christianity through a dominant and powerful languaculture. The bridges thus built resemble those the West constructed to be joined

35 Harries, "Preventing Abuses", 13.

36 This quest is addressed, e.g. by the Ghanaian theologian Peter White in "Decolonising Western Missionaries' Mission Theology and Practice in Ghanaian Church History: A Pentecostal Approach" in *In Die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 51 no. 1 (2017).

37 Mika Vähäkangas, "How to Respect the Religious Quasi-Other? Methodological Considerations in Studying the Kimbanguist Doctrine of Incarnation" in *Faith in African Lived Christianity: Bridging Anthropological and Theological Perspectives*, edited by Karen Lauterbach and Mika Vähäkangas, (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2020), 137. Cf. also Paul Hiebert's demonstration of how a critical realist epistemological paradigm in missiology extends and bridges the specific limitations of both anthropology and theology in Paul G. Hiebert, *Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts. Affirming Truth in a Modern/Postmodern World* (Harriesburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 96-103.

with Christ, the solid ground. Mission-built bridges can be similar to the bridges in the missionaries' home environment e.g. in terms of their wooden structures that are well suited to cross rocky patches. However, such design may be ill-suited for the swampy areas required to be traversed by the people among whom the missionaries are working. The wooden logs may soon sink and rot and be inadequate to keep a trustworthy, stable connection with the gospel. What do people do if they find that their bridge to Jesus, the solid ground, is unreliable? One option is to relocate, perhaps to the rocky patches with solid wooden bridges – e.g. via "the faithful replication of Christian forms and patterns developed in Europe", which Lamin Sanneh called 'Global Christianity'.[38] Or, if they reject the temptation – or pressure – to assimilate and seek to root their adopted faith more firmly in their own linguistic and cultural contexts, they might decide to build stone pillars instead which are able to support their bridge. In Sanneh's terms, such embracing of theological diversity could be classified as 'World Christianity'.[39] Constructing in indigenous ways, however, can have people come under pressure not to give in to the demands of their surroundings, i.e. to bow to 'syncretism' – which usually ignores the contextual nature of Western and indeed, all Christianity.[40] Vulnerable approaches to mission sidestep such predicaments through assisting to build bridges with materials and tools available locally, enabling ownership, contextual relevance and durability. The foundation for missionary work is still to know Christ and to be under the authority of Scripture. However, the Christ in Scripture will be mediated on people's own terms, avoiding the creation of access paths to the solid ground that are built with inadequate tools, dependent on foreign materials or resources and end up being little suitable for the environment they are needed in. Enabling and not restricting the religious freedom of vulnerable missionaries may therefore be crucial for an indigenous community's acquisition of faith that is true to the Bible but based on their own cultural-linguistic foundations.

Vulnerable approaches to mission, rather than being dismissed, should therefore be regarded as a sound and effective alternative, complementing ministries that depend and build on global languages as well as Western theological and financial resources.

38 Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West*. (Grand Rapids, Mich. and Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 22.

39 Sanneh, "Whose Religion", 22.

40 John Roxborogh, "Syncretism, Contextualisation and Inculturation in Situations of Religious Diversity and Mission from the Margins: The Syncretism of Conversion and the Conversion of Syncretism" Paper presented at the AAMS Triennial Conference at Tabor College, Adelaide (2014), https://www.academia.edu/12300863/Syncretism_contextualisation_and_inculturation_the_syncretism_of_conversion_and_the_conversion_of_syncretism, 2; Mika Vähäkangas, *Context, Plurality, and Truth: Theology in World Christianities* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2020), 55.

Of course, by their very – culturally-embedded – nature they can appear to be at odds with language practices or theological orthodoxy that are dominated by Western perspectives mediated through former colonial languages.[41] The above illustration emphasises, however, that radical vulnerability to the cultural other in mission does not reject orthodox faith. Instead, it acknowledges and honours cultural dissimilarity which can be concealed by the use of global languages in cross-cultural communication.[42] This implies building on cultural and linguistic foundations in cross-cultural ministry that are different to the contexts where the contents of orthodox faith were developed in past centuries. In that, vulnerable approaches to mission emphasise both languaculture and process. Being true to Scripture remains a goal – as it should in the West. However, wrestling with the Bible, learning to express and live out biblical truths in relevant ways, should be expected to be going on over long periods of time as communities – not just individuals – need to spell out what this "change in religious allegiance" means in their context.[43] Moreover, it will – naturally – entail a moulding of the biblical message according to the contours of the cultural-linguistic landscape it is received in.

Similarly, with regards to the rejection of using foreign resources in cross-cultural ministry, vulnerable approaches to mission can pose a valuable alternative to conventional ones. Restricting oneself to what is available locally is not only empowering and counters unhealthy dependency on outsiders.[44] It also prevents giving false incentives and inadvertently communicating a gospel of prosperity.[45] Instead of hindering, it enables an effective, gospel-shaped transformation of 'envy' which, as Harries holds, tends to translate 'witchcraft' in many African countries.[46] And lastly, not using foreign funds in ministry minimises the risk of foreign dominance in relationships. Vulnerability in mission, despite the *prima facie* appearance of stinginess, therefore has the potential to counter and make up for issues identified as problematic in involving money in Christian ministry.[47]

Finally, there are many Western churches and ministries who – for valid and honourable reasons – find themselves in full-out support of internationally agreed standards

41 Cf. Vähäkangas, "How to Respect".
42 Grohmann, "Seeking Reconciliation", 39.
43 Roxborogh, "Syncretism", 5.
44 Jean Johnson, "The Best Way to Plant Indigenous Churches Is to Begin That Way" in *Slaying the Dependency Dragon* (no. Sep-Oct 2016), http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/the-best-way-to-plant-indigenous-churches, accessed 2 April 2024.
45 Harries, "Communication", 69 ff.
46 Jim Harries, "Envy: Differences between the West and Africa." *Missiology: An International Review* 51 no. 4 (2023), 324.
47 Cf. Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor . . . and Yourself*. 2nd Edition (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2014); Harries, "Insights", 23-40.

(like 'safeguarding'), the conceptualisation, motivation and implementation of which are rooted in Western epistemologies and languacultures. Earlier, it was indicated that for all the good intentions, such regulations can also have downsides for societies in the majority world, missionaries seeking to make themselves vulnerable to the people they are serving as well as their support community. It was shown that the insistence on vulnerable missionaries to unreservedly comply with policies designed to safeguard from power abuse can be misguided. The first reason given was that these missionaries sidestep the very positions of power the abuse of which people are understood to need protection from. The second reason was that vulnerable missionaries tend to be embedded in local accountability structures that are contextually relevant but appear to be irrelevant to rules prescribed globally (e.g.) for UK citizens.[48]

Of course, laws cannot and should not be ignored. We can also concede that from a certain perspective, vulnerable approaches to mission can appear risky to some and implicitly challenge more dominant and nowadays conventional ways of being involved in cross-cultural Christian ministry. Nevertheless, it may be worth pointing out that in their radicality of honouring cultural differences and minimising the risk of giving material rewards for conforming to expectations a mission or church might have, vulnerable approaches to mission in fact uphold ethical standards for good mission practice.[49]

How to ensure the freedom of religion of vulnerable missionaries

In light of the challenges sketched above, the support networks of vulnerable missionaries have the responsibility as well as the opportunity to contribute to their ongoing freedom of religion – *de jure* and *de facto*. At the same time, because of the challenging nature of having to communicate nowadays unconventional approaches to mission, missionaries have a shared responsibility in this respect.

It is not unusual for vulnerable mission practices to sometimes be perceived as being at odds with expectations of the missionaries' supporting networks. In this case, it would be beneficial for all to regard the supporter relationship as a mutual learning journey. Support networks can gain a lot from learning from the unique cross-cultural insights of the missionaries. Missionaries, on the other hand, may benefit from constructive engagement over – in their eyes – non-vulnerable ways of practicing communication and relationships in dominant languages in the increasingly multicultural societies in the West. At the very least, they can increase their understanding of often encountered hesitance towards vulnerability in mission and use this knowledge to become more persuasive in respect of their mission model.

For such missionary-supporter relationships to be fruitful, trust is a key require-

48 Harries and Grohmann, "Responsible and Contextual".

49 Cf. Christof Sauer, "Mission in Bold Humility" in *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 3 no. 1 (2010), 75; The Oslo Coalition, "Missionary activities", 119 f.

ment. Such trust should not be blind and naïve vis-à-vis missionaries working in languacultural contexts the supporters can hardly enter themselves. On the other hand, it should not be blind and naïve either vis-à-vis shortcomings and problems arising from norm-setting, more convenient types of world mission as well as dominant – and at times domineering[50] – legislation that risks putting the missionaries' life and work in danger. Missionaries may well need support – e.g. in the form of prayer, administration and advocacy – in navigating the dilemmas that international and local exigencies can pose.

In their vulnerability to local communities, missionaries emphasising vulnerable ministry practices are also vulnerable to being frequently misunderstood by their non-vulnerable peers as well as their home communities. Doubt entering the relationships with their support networks endangers the mental, physical and perhaps even the spiritual well-being of the missionaries. Because of their specific roles and despite their decision to not use foreign funds in their ministry, they often depend on regular financial support from outside their ministry contexts. At the same time, support networks often serve as 'home (while) away from home'. The sparse association with non-locals in the field makes this so vital for the missionaries' mental and spiritual health. To be 'grounded' and understood *somewhere* enables them to practically experience their freedom of religion in respect of their ministries. It enables them to be close to the communities they serve in a vulnerable way. The existential trust with supporters back home can be based e.g. in long-term relationships, in engaging with various forms of reports of the missionaries from their contexts and in occasional visits by supporter representatives. The latter can be a particular gift to the vulnerable missionary as experience tells that ministry which is not able to show results in terms of church growth, a project or beneficiaries of funds struggles to get the attention of supporter-visitors. Furthermore, supporter-visits of vulnerable missionaries need to be learning experiences, not opportunities to bring in outside ideas and resources that would undermine the vulnerable ministry.

All of the above can help grow understanding and appreciation for contextual issues pertaining to the ministry as such and to sometimes strained relationships e.g. with non-vulnerable ministries. Such understanding can be key in contributing to a robust support network and to the resolution of potential issues arising from misguided demands made on the vulnerable missionaries by other, ill-informed supporters.

Conclusion

"Among all human rights", suggests Thomas Schirrmacher, "the right to religious liberty is one of those that are the most difficult to substantiate and to cast into law and on which to reach compromise. Why? Because religion cannot be limited to a

50 Harries, "Preventing Abuses", 13.

certain part of life."[51] This paper has highlighted a dimension of religious freedom that often goes unnoticed: the actual, *de facto* ability of vulnerable missionaries to carry out their 'risky', sometimes subversive ministry which depends on the buy-in of their support networks. The "right to present one's belief to the general public and to try to attract people to it",[52] it was shown, goes beyond assuring liberties in terms of legal frameworks. Within a religious community it touches on what is considered ethical, theologically orthodox and even what is held to be true and desirable in respect of intercultural relationships and communication as experienced in everyday life. While important to consider, the very nature of vulnerable approaches to mission creates the challenge of communicating insights and justifications for such ministry practice understandably, 'cross-culturally' to the support networks at home. Living up to this challenge is crucial for vulnerable missionaries because it is these networks that are to a good extent *realising* the missionaries' right to religious freedom. If this paper with its analysis of various problems and depiction of the rationale of vulnerable approaches to mission can be of assistance in this respect, it will have served its purpose.

One needs to take note, though, that treating the right to religious freedom of vulnerable missionaries raises further questions that are worthy of future enquiries. The sociological fact and the theological legitimacy of so-called insider movements or highly contextualised forms of Christianity has been subject of debate for several decades now.[53] Certainly, few in the West would dispute the general, *de jure* right to religious freedom of such religious communities. However, the severity of critique of their contextualisation[54] should encourage discussions of and investigations into ways Western-based or -aligned organisations and churches do perhaps infringe on their *de facto* freedom of religion. Ways, in which this risk presents itself, include offering "worldly benefits" to individuals for joining more 'orthodox' kinds of churches[55] but also veiled threats to peoples' cultures and identities when locally, becoming 'Christian' is – implicitly or explicitly – communicated as becoming 'Western'.[56] This, of course,

51 Thomas Schirrmacher, "Defending Religious Freedom of Christians Benefits All" in *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 1 no. 1 (2008), 25.

52 Schirrmacher, "Defending", 23.

53 E.g. S.T. Antonio, *Insider Church* *Littleton, CO: William Carey Publishing, 2020); Darren T. Duerksen, *Christ-Followers in Other Religions: The Global Witness of Insider Movements* (Oxford: Regnum, 2022); Harley Talman and John Jay Travis, *Understanding Insider Movements: Disciples of Jesus within Diverse Religious Communities* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2006); see also Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa. The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh and Maryknoll, NY: Edinburgh University Press, Orbis Books, 1995); Sanneh, "Whose Religion".

54 E.g. Garner, "High Stakes".

55 The Oslo Coalition, "Missionary activities", 118.

56 Marie Bauer, "New Wineskins? A Case Study on How Assumptions about the Way We Do Church Become Movement Blockers" in *Mission Frontiers* Nov-Dec (2014), 21.

is where we are brought back to the value of vulnerable approaches to mission that – while not claiming to be the only ones working without such incentives – try to take radical measures to avoid misleading communication of the gospel. For the sake of this gospel, the benefit of the host communities as well as the well-being of the missionaries, measures deserve to be taken to ensure that the latter's *de facto* freedom of religion remains adequately protected.