

**Rethinking the Great Commission for the African Context:
A Proposal for the Paradigm of Relational Missiology (Part II)**

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Published in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org. July 2019
([Part I](#) published in April 2019)

Abstract

Given the fact that the popular practice in Christian mission in the West is “entrepreneurial” in conceptualization and “managerial” in operation, “relational missiology” is proposed as an alternative for the African context. In sharp contrast to western “managerial missiology” approaches, relational missiology is scripturally based, theologically grounded, theoretically coherent and contextually relevant for the African context for practical implementation.

Key Words: African, Critical Realism, Epistemology, Managerial, Relational

(From Part I)

Introduction

This article is written in response to the call for inclusive input from the Global South in international missiological discourse as stated in the “Iguassu Affirmation” of 1999. That gathering of 160 mission practitioners, missiologists and church leaders from 53 countries in South America issued the following:

We rejoice in diverse missiological voices emerging around the world, but we confess that we have not taken them all into our theory and practice. Old paradigms still prevail. Participation by and awareness of the global church, as well as mission from people of all nations to people of all nations, are needed for a valid missiology in our time (World Evangelical Fellowship Mission Commission 2001:50).

This article thus seeks to engage African mission leaders in rethinking the Great Commission for the African context. First, the article (in Part I) will provide a critique of the prevalent missiological paradigm in the West. Second, the article (in Part II) will propose relational missiology as a viable alternative for the African context.

(Part II)

A helpful way to begin this article’s presentation of “relational missiology” (RM), particularly as an appropriate approach for African contexts, is to compare it with “managerial missiology” (MM), as in Figure 2 below.

ASPECTS	MANAGERIAL MISSIOLOGY	RELATIONAL MISSIOLOGY
#1 FOCUS	-Emulating secular business management model: focus on programming & confident in detailed	-Relation-oriented: focusing on both vertical and horizontal relationship with priority;

#2 CONCEPTUALIZATION

planning for

predictable result

- Emphasis: Focusing on horizontal relationship with a low (or no) view of vertical

- Epistemological paradigm: Subscribe to “critical realism”

-Entrepreneurship:

- Efficiency & outcome based & profiting in relationship

- Lip service to vertical relationship; man-centered

- Instrumentalism/functionalism (felt needs approach, receptor-oriented)

- pragmatism (measurable success & outcome-base; effort-

optimism: what counts is trying hard and long enough;

packaging: event and action)

- Performance-based: empirical & impersonal

- “Babel Complex” (Gen. 10: man-centered)

- City (not to be scattered) & tower (vanity)

-Emulating the secular business management model:

- humanistic and impersonal

- Managerially statistical and strategic: quantifiable outcomes/

Christian mission is enterprise:

- Commodification of Christianity & consumerism thus “mercenary;” instead of “missionary”

-Emphasis: Focus on vertical over horizontal; but not without horizontal

- Epistemological paradigm: Subscribe to “Relational realism”

- Convergence of systems: Triune God, angel,

human being

- Multi-level: individual & institutional

- Multi-contextual: Triune God, angelic & human systems

- Multi-dimensional: spiritual, social & transformational

- Relationally nurturing

- First and foremost – glorifying God; but

inclusive of network of horizontal relationships

- Interdisciplinary approach

- High-context, high touch,

- People-oriented & complex & converging

Networks of God, angels & humanity

- Reciprocity and strategic – Kingdom

partnership

- Holistic Christianity:

#3 PERSPECTIVE

#4 OPERATION

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recipient of Gospel as customers or target group -Dichotomy: “the Great Commandment” vs “the Great Commission,” saving soul vs serving human/social needs - Operational principle: • Technology is a major “focus” in terms of quantifiable goals, formulaic approach and methodological procedures 	<p>integrating “the Great Commandment” & “the Great Commission”</p> <p>- Operational principle: relation-oriented, community-base & collectivistic in operation.</p>
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Figure 2 – Comparison of “Managerial Missiology” and “Relational Missiology”

A Proposed Alternative for the African Context

It is worth noting that the concept of “five selfs of the Church of Christ” was the underlying conviction for both the Iguassu Consultation as well as its compendium volume, i.e. self-supporting, self-governing, self-propagating, self-theologizing and self-missilogizing (Taylor 2011:550). This article is my response, on behalf of my Christian colleagues in Africa, to this call for the Church worldwide to take initiative appropriate to each indigenous setting, including in theologizing and missilogizing.

The epistemological option of a “relational realism” paradigm

The author’s epistemological paradigm is not “critical realism” as Paul Hiebert had opted; but instead “relational realism.” For further reading on a relational paradigm, readers are advised to consult published works listed in Appendix 1. Unlike the theoretical framework of an anthropologist/missiologist of the West, the author has proposed a definition of “culture” as “the context/consequence of patterned interaction between personal beings (Beings),” a definition that shares the same epistemological and ontological assumptions as “relational realism.”

After an extensive study on various epistemological paradigms of western scholarly traditions, Paul Hiebert has successfully defended his preference for “critical realism” in his book, *Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts: Finding Truth in a Modern/Postmodern World* (Hiebert 1999:37-38). The relational paradigm being proposed here is based on “relational realism,” which is different from the “critical realism” of Hiebert (1999:37-38).

As shown in Figure 3 below, critical realism is too closely aligned with science epistemologically and empirically. The “umpire’s response” in critical realism is too man-centered, in particular too dependent on human perception and human objectivity (i.e. “I call it the way I see it). In contrast to critical realism, “relational realism” is God-centered ontologically, epistemologically and existentially.

2 KINDS OF REALISM	NATURE OF KNOWLEDGE	OF RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SYSTEMS OF KNOWLEDGE	THE UMPIRE'S RESPONSE
Critical realism	<p>“The external world is real. Our knowledge of it is partial but can be true. Science is a map or model. It is made up of successive paradigms that bring us to closer approximations of reality and absolute truth.”</p>	<p>“Each field in science presents a different blue-print of reality. These are complementary to one another. Integration is achieved, not by reducing them all to one model, but by seeing their interrelationship. Each gives us partial insights into reality.”</p>	<p>“I call it the way I see it, but there is a real pitch and an objective standard against which I must judge it. I can be shown to be right or wrong.”</p>
Relational realism	<p>The external world is real but that reality is based primarily based on the vertical relationship on God & His created order (Acts 14:14-17, 17:24-31), secondarily based on horizontal relationship within the created order (i.e. spirit world, human world and natural order).</p> <p>God is the absolute Truth. Science is a road map and may provide human-based paradigm that cannot exclusively claim to be the only way to closer approximations of reality and absolute truth. Scientist, with a modernist orientation, has neither monopoly to truth nor can dogmatically/ conclusively/ exhaustively make pronouncement on reality.</p>	<p>God is the Truth: His Word (incarnate with personhood, inscripturate & revealed in written form) is truth, His work (creation, redemption, transformation, etc.) is truthful. Therefore, truth and reality are: multi-dimensional, multi-level and multi-contextual.</p> <p>All human efforts & disciplines (science, theology, philosophy, etc.) without vertical relationship to God (the Absolute Reality) at best are defective ways to approximate truth and reality (for being unidimensional = horizontal; single-level= human plain field; uni-contextual = shutting out the spirit world of God & angels (Satan & fallen angels included). Truth & reality are best to be comprehended and experienced in relational networks of God & the created 3 orders, i.e. angels, humanity and nature.</p>	<p>Man, without God and His revelation (Incarnate and inscripturate Word) and illumination (H.S.), can be blinded to truth & reality. Therefore, he is not the umpire to make the final call of being: real or illusion, truth or untruth, right or wrong, good or bad.</p> <p>No human judgment is final, nor can it be dogmatic</p> <p>/conclusive; without the vertical relationship to God—the absolute Truth & the most Real.</p>

Figure 3 – Hiebert’s “Critical Realism” vis-a-vis Wan’s “Relational Realism” (Wan 2006:2)

Proposing a relational paradigm for contextualization in Africa

Cognitive patterns (structure) and mental processes (operation) vary cross-culturally. Figure 4 below is a comparison between African and North American cognitive patterns.

AREA		NORTH AMERICAN	AFRICAN
pattern	1. General	-low-context	-high-context
	2. Perception:		
	2.1 nature	-material, mechanistic	-organic, organismic
	2.2 self	-separate from nature	-integrate with nature
	2.3 other	-equality, individualism	-hierarchy, communal
	3. Conception:		
	3.1 deity	-monotheism, atheism	-polytheism, animism, spiritism
3.2 self	-independent, unique	-member of a group (including ancestor of the spirit-world)	
3.3 truth	-Bible/rational-relative	-naturalism, humanism	
3.4 knowledge.	- <i>a priori / a posteriori</i>	-cyclical, intuitive, introspective	
3.5 time	-lineal		
4. Preference:			
4.1 personal	-achievement/autonomy	-ascription/inter-dependence	
4.2 social	-egalitarian/voluntary	-hierarchy/inequality	
4.3 goal	-diversity/self-actualization	-unity/group-solidarity	
5. Predisposition:			
5.1 individual & social	-doing/program -competition	-being/people -cooperation	
5.2 ethical	-guilt/universal justice	-shame/situational justice	
5.3 goal	/proselytization -change /effort-optimism	/reconciliation/syncretism -equilibrium/conservatism /relation-optimism	
Process	1. time-management	-mono-chronic	-poly-chronic
	2. logic	-inductive	-deductive
	3. methodology	-empirical, causative (obj.)	-intuitive/introspective (subj.)

4. tendency	-quantitative, mathematical	-qualitative, ontological
5. approach	-analytical	-analogical/relational
6. operation	- dialectic/duality/dichotomist /directive/aggressive	-correlational/holistic/integrative /non-directive
7. direction	-teleological, future	-historical/retrospective

Figure 4 – North American and African cognitive patterns/processes (adapted from Wan 1995:3)

The table above has many implications for contextualization in Africa; a detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this paper. Only four areas (see “Aspects” in Figure 2 above) are selectively explained below.

The rethinking of the Great Commission is to be inclusive of the tasks listed below:

The Consultation, however, affirmed newer models of mission, which emphasize the development of mission movements in every country where there is a mature Christian church. The Iguassu Affirmation, a 2,275 word declaration, signed Friday by the participants present for the final communion service, reversed the traditional Western to Two Thirds-World flow and advocated the vision of "doing missiology and mission by people of all nations to people of all nations. Participants in the Consultation also endorsed a fuller understanding of the nature of and obedience to the Great Commission; they questioned over-dependence on *managerial methods in mission...* (Taylor 1999).

These characteristics have significant implications for contextualization in Africa for Christian missions. In “relational realism,” reality is based on the vertical relationship of God and his created order, and secondarily on the horizontal relationship within the created order. This is also the case for African nations, even outside of Christianity or before Christian influences became prominent. Obiefuna writes in this regard, “There can be no meaningful human relations without the spiritual/abstract qualities that religion offers” (ref?). Ezenweke and Nwadiolor, quoted earlier, also write, “Religion is the main principle that dominates the life of an African man and sets a definite tone in his relationship with nature and his fellow man” (Ezenweke and Nwadiolor 2013:63).

Focus

The focus of a “relational paradigm” is on the interactive relational networks between personal beings (including Beings of the Triune God), angels, and humanity. Relation-oriented theology and missiology are focusing on both vertical and horizontal relationships, with priority on the vertical over the horizontal.

It is clear that, culturally speaking, the vertical has always informed the horizontal within African socio-cultural contexts. The vertical relationship with the “other-worldly” (or ancestors) or “God-figure” has always set the foundation for how Africans understand their relationships with each other horizontally. In other words, “relational realism” has already proven itself to be an excellent bridge for integrating Christian faith and African cultures.

Perhaps this is why the inherent relational nature of the Gospel has resonated powerfully in the African continent over the years, and not necessarily in a Western way. Andrew F. Walls, commenting on modern African Christianity, observes that it

... is not only the result of movements among Africans, but it has been principally sustained by Africans and is to a surprising extent the result of African initiatives. Even the missionary factor must be put into perspective. There is something symbolic in the fact that the first church in tropical Africa in modern times was not a missionary creation at all (Walls 1999:167).

Therefore, a “relational realism” paradigm is proposed in this paper to best fit the African context if the Gospel is to continue to resonate.

Furthermore, this type of tendency must be encouraged in the future as well. As profound as Paul Hiebert and other “critical realists” have been for their generation in their context, “relational realism” is probably the best contextualization method for Africa, and the hope is that this excellent alternative is not discarded or ignored, as shown in Figure 2 above.

Conceptualization

The cognitive pattern of the western mind is dichotomist, as addressed by the author previously (Wan 1998, 1999, 2004) and by Paul Hiebert. In the relational paradigm proposed, there is the convergence of systems: Triune God, angels, and human beings. An important aspect of an African cognitive pattern is that it is multi-level: individual and institutional are merged to become highly communal and collectivistic, not like the western way of having “self” being the focus within individualism. Instead of a compartmentalized understanding of human existence and reality; Africa collectivism goes beyond the here and now. It expands to include ancestors of the past and in the spirit-world.

Stated differently, the African cognitive pattern and process is multi-contextual, i.e. there is a convergence of the Triune God, angelic realities, and human systems - for all entities are interactive and interdependent at all times. African conceptualization is also multi-dimensional, i.e. it is holistic including spiritual, social and transformational realities. Since an African universe is cyclical, the spheres of spiritual and social are intertwined without compartmentalization or lineal sequencing.

Perspective

In the practice of relational missiology, first and foremost it should be vertically oriented to glorify God and not to a quantifiable outcome of success. It is to be couched within the framework of a vertical relationship with the Triune God: dependence on God the Father’s grace and wisdom, God the son’s atoning efficacy and enduring promise, and God the Spirit’s empowerment and presence. In contrast with the MM of the West, RM for the African context is to be nurturing of horizontal relationships of marriage, family, kin-groups, and community.

Operation

The practical implementation of relational missiology is to be high-context and high touch, instead of programmatic and impersonal. Within the African context, the Great Commission is not a lofty idea or a designed program; it is to be concretely people-oriented. There are the

complex and converging relational networks of multi-level, multi-contextual and multi-dimensional to be included in operation.

The old way of paternalistic practices of western missionaries is to be replaced by reciprocity and Kingdom partnership (Wan 2014: chapters 13, 14). The dichotomy of separating the Great Commandment from the Great Commission in MM should be replaced by a holistic way akin to African culture as discussed elsewhere.

The practical way of implementing RM in terms of relational leadership training, relational counseling, relational mentoring, and relational discipleship has been addressed by the author in publications in Chinese. While not within the scope of this article, the author may be contacted for further information and discussion.

Conclusion

In light of the reality that “managerial missiology” has been commonly practiced in the West, “relational missiology” has been proposed in this article as an alternative for the fulfilment of the Great Commission in African contexts.

This article has described the importance of relationships in the African context, as well as given a critique of the prevalent missiological paradigm of the West in the form of managerial missiology. By way of rethinking the Great Commission for the African context, relational missiology is proposed here as an alternative for contextualization in Africa. RM is scripturally based, theologically grounded, theoretically coherent, and contextually relevant for the African context for practical implementation.

Appendix - Published works by Enoch Wan on “interdisciplinary research methodology,” a new definition of “culture” and “relational paradigm”

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