

A Relational Epistemology

Introduction

Ruth Wall
Chair IMTN

Last month I sat with more than fifty women to share discipleship stories from across Central Asia. These stories inspired but they also strengthened faith as we heard how God worked in one life here and in one situation there. Stories have the potential to transform. What stories do we in the IMTN have to share? What challenges and encouragements have we experienced this year as we invest in others through the ministry of training? It would be valuable to include our stories in our regular IMTN Bulletins.

In our last Bulletin (May 2018) Mark Hedinger described the focal point for life and ministry as relationship. Reality is understood through our vertical and horizontal relationships. In this Bulletin David Williams continues the relationship conversation by digging below the idea of a relational paradigm to the foundation of knowing itself. Relationship is not simply our way of experiencing the world it is the way in which we know. In this article Williams uses the term a “relational epistemology”. This is a philosophical issue that is deeply important to us as educators as we seek to nurture an enduring knowledge of God in others – “epistemology” being how we know about knowing. David Williams states “A relational epistemology serves us best in all our knowing endeavours.” And of course, as an education practitioner I find an appeal in seeing a strong link between a relational epistemology and a relational pedagogy!

Rev Dr David Williams is the Principal at St Andrew’s Hall in Melbourne, Australia. In February I was able to visit him and his wife, Rachel, and meet the wonderful community of students preparing for long term cross-cultural life and ministry. Thank you, David, for this stimulating article.

A Relational Epistemology

Rev. Dr David Williams

I have served in theological education for twenty years. For the last ten years my focus has been solely on training long-term missionaries. I have watched many long-term workers head into cross-cultural ministry; for a small number, mission has led to a crisis of faith.

The story begins with a journey travelled by every long-termer. It unfolds something like this: in his home context, Jim has a strong and vibrant faith. He is very sure about God, the Bible and theology. He knows God and he knows that his knowledge of God is true. The majority of the Christians that he relates to believe the same things about God as he does. His faith feels very secure.

Jim arrives in another culture. He learns language, which takes a good few years. Slowly he develops ministry relationships with local Christians and non-Christians. He discovers that they think differently to him. He discovers that the local Christians are exactly that – true disciples of Jesus Christ. Yet their theology is different to his, they read the Bible differently, they worship differently. Some of their beliefs seem frankly heretical to him – but he can't escape the fact that they are sisters and brothers in Christ. As Jim reflects on this, he begins to wonder about the foundations of his own faith. His knowledge of God, which seemed so solid, now feels less certain.

Many long-term cross-cultural workers go through this kind of existential faith journey. The vast majority come out the other side with a deeper, more vibrant and more mature faith in Jesus Christ. For a small number, however, the questions lead to disaster: “how do I account for this diversity?” leads to “how can I know God at all?”

I have had pastoral contact with at least two long-term workers who have experienced a crisis of faith exactly like this. Such a crisis is often expressed as a crisis about God. God is considered unreliable or untrustworthy. The problem, I suggest, is not God. Rather, the problem is knowing. The long-term worker has a faith crisis about “knowing God.” The problem is not a faulty God but a faulty epistemology.

I think this experience explains why missiologists have been very interested in epistemology, the theory of knowledge. Missiologists operate in the world of cultural diversity. Cultural diversity can lead to epistemological relativism. We risk losing our moorings if we do not know how to know. Lesslie Newbigin and Paul Hiebert both wrote extensively on the theme of epistemology precisely because it is so relevant in our academic discipline.¹

The subject of epistemology relates directly to the themes raised by Mark Hedinger in the last edition of the IMTN Bulletin.² Mark outlined a relational approach to missionary training based on a relational paradigm in the Bible and in Christian ministry. This relational paradigm is itself based on a relational epistemology. The faith crisis I have illustrated flows from an epistemology that is not relational. It is the epistemology that people in Western contexts absorb through their education. It teaches that the most objective, certain kind of knowing is a knowing proved definitively by a scientific experiment. You know something is true if you can put it in a test tube and repeat the experiment 100 times out of 100.

The problem with this model is that it works for such a tiny, fractional amount of human knowing. It does not explain the kind of knowing that has led to most major scientific

¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989); *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995); Paul G. Hiebert, *Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts: Affirming Truth in a Modern/Postmodern World* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999).

² Mark Hedinger, "A Relational Approach to Missionary Training," *International Missionary Training Network* 11 (2018).

advances. These advances usually happen because a scientist had a hunch, tried it out and the hunch proved correct. Advances generally do not happen without this first intuition.

Michael Polanyi developed a model of epistemology that offered an alternative to test-tube knowing.³ His work was seminal for Newbigin and has been developed further by American Philosopher Esther Lightcap Meek. Meek has developed a relational epistemology that flows out of Polanyi, Newbigin and John Frame, amongst others.⁴ As a research scientist, Polanyi reacted to what he saw as a faulty conception of objectivity. Newbigin explains:

Polanyi traced the source of the trouble in a false ideal of ‘objectivity’, in the illusion that there could be a kind of knowing from which the knowing subject – a human being shaped by historical, cultural and psychological factors – is eliminated or ignored. The effect of this false ideal was to relegate a vast amount of what human beings know to the realm of the ‘subjective’.⁵

Polanyi argued that “all knowing of any kind involved personal commitment and the acceptance of personal responsibility for one’s beliefs.”⁶ Meek has developed Polanyi’s work into a fully formed covenant epistemology. She begins with Polanyi’s concept of subsidiary-focal integration. Humans know, not from putting something in a test tube, but by attending to clues. These clues, or subsidiaries, enable us to integrate the clues and put them into focus. Early in our knowing we have to pay a great deal of attention to these clues. But as they become familiar to us, we become integrated with them. An obvious example of this is learning to ride a bicycle. Early on, I think about my balance a lot. Once I’ve learned, this knowledge becomes tacit. Meek goes on to argue that “we should take covenantally constituted interpersonal relationships as our paradigm of all acts of knowing.”⁷ Or to put it more simply, all knowing is relational and all truth is truth in relationship. Meek seeks to model the case that she makes by structuring her argument around a series of conversations with a variety of academics.⁸

While Hiebert offers critical realism as a middle way between positivism and instrumentalism,⁹ Meek’s approach is to try to shift the whole frame of the epistemological debate. She argues that all knowing is interpersoned¹⁰ and that to separate knowledge from people is a fundamentally flawed approach. For Meek, all human knowing flows from the reality that we are known by God and made in His image. So, truth is developed as conversation, in relationship both with other human beings and the God who made us.

³ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

⁴ Esther Lightcap Meek, *Loving to Know: Covenant Epistemology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011); John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P and R Publishing, 1987).

⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, "Introduction," in *Everyman Revived: The Common Sense of Michael Polanyi*, ed. Drusilla Scott (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), iv.

⁶ *Ibid.*, v.

⁷ Meek, 396.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Paul G. Hiebert, *Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts: Affirming Truth in a Modern/Postmodern World*, Christian Mission and Modern Culture (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999).

¹⁰ “Interpersoned” is a neologism that Meek uses to mean “person in relationship to others.” She prefers “interpersoned” to “personal” because “personal” tends to mean isolated from others rather than denoting “person in relationship.”

Meek's approach provides a framework within which to develop 'true truth' through relational engagement. The essence of Meek's covenantally-constituted relational engagement is that of Christian love, hence she uses "Loving to Know" as her title.¹¹ This epistemological stance provides a framework within which I can hold together a commitment both to 'true truth' and to the variety of human cultural expressions.

How does this help Jim, our missionary having a crisis about "knowing God?" If he understands that knowing is modelled best by relationship, not by what are called "objective facts", it enables him to embrace new perspectives in order to get to know God better. I have been married to my wife for 30 years. I continue to learn new things about her. But this new knowledge does not invalidate the way that I knew her on our wedding day. Knowing God is knowing a person. This kind of knowing is our best and most accurate model of knowing. A relational epistemology serves us best in all our knowing endeavours.

For the missionary trainer, Parker Palmer provides a direct link between a relational epistemology and a relational pedagogy.¹² By attending to the quality of the relationships in the classroom, the teacher "creates a space in which obedience to the truth is practiced."¹³ We create this space through hospitality, by allowing a spirit of openness and appreciation within secure and safe boundaries.

As Mission Educators, we know that a relational model of teaching is essential if we are to equip people for cross-cultural service. Our relational pedagogy should also communicate an undergirding relational epistemology. Equipping our trainees with this epistemological foundation will enable them to engage in a culturally diverse world without losing their moorings.

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¹¹ Meek.

¹² Parker J. Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* (New York: Harper Collins, 1983).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 69.

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