

## **Shaping A Relational Self: Contextualizing the Christian Faith in Asian/Asian-American Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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### **Introduction**

The resource most to our society's response to the COVID-19 pandemic is empathic relationships. The key to the Christian faith is the shaping of the relational self by establishing empathic relationships with God and others. Paradoxically, the coronavirus pandemic crisis is giving new salience to the importance of relationships. The anxieties of this age are stoking individualism and ethnocentric nationalism, bringing to the surface deep-rooted anti-Asian racism, hatred toward immigrants and refugees, and the gap between the rich and the poor in the United States. In light of the current situation, Asian and Asian-American theologians need to faithfully contextualize the forms, contents, and praxis of the Christian faith by engaging with the crisis in a way that is true to their faith. In other words, the Christian faith should appropriately empathize with those who are suffering from hard times by critically examining the current situation and focusing on the shaping of a relational self that can empathically re-establish relationships with God and others.

To this end, this paper will suggest ways of contextualizing the forms, contents, and praxis of the Christian faith via a triadic dialogue between the Christian idea of a relational self as self-in-community, Jean-Luc Nancy's idea of being singular plural, and the Confucian idea of humaneness (*ren*, 仁) based on empathy (*shu*, 恕) as expressed in Enoch Wan's relational realism. It is hoped that this contextualization can aid in the fight against individualism and ethnocentric nationalism in these challenging times. That is, a theological/scriptural, philosophical, and anthropological approach rooted in the Christian faith can support Asians/Asian-Americans who live out the Christian faith in subjectively transforming the recent climate of hatred in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

First of all, this paper will integrate phenomenal, theological/scriptural, philosophical, and cultural dimensions of the relational self that are relevant for contextualizing the Christian faith of Asians/Asian-Americans. The paper confines itself to the Asian/Asian-American perspective, reflecting limitations to my research related to my ethnic and racial group as a Korean. However, my goal is to use this identification to generate unique insights into contextualizing the Christian faith in the United States through a triadic dialogue between Christian, philosophical, and Confucian traditions.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen D Wu, *Color of Success - Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority*, 2015; Mia Tuan, *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites? The Asian Ethnic Experience Today* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 1998). Asians and Asian-Americans have usually been subordinate in racial discourse in the United States. Because Asians/Asian-Americans are perceived as a collective success, according to the model minority myth, many scholars intentionally minimize the role of Asians/Asian-Americans in racial and ethnic struggles, compared to that of other racial and ethnic groups.

First, contextualization<sup>2</sup> is a vital process of asymmetrically interacting with God as the Absolute within the ever-changing cultural settings in which people live out their faith.

Second, the relational self refers to an authentic self constructed via relationships, especially via the intimate relationship with God or the empathic relationship with others in the world.

Lastly, the ultimate Confucian value of humaneness (*ren*, 仁) based on empathy (*shu*, 恕) represents the relational nature of human beings. Overcoming individualism and ethnocentric nationalism (collectivism), humaneness (*ren*, 仁) based on empathy (*shu*, 恕) provides a profound sense of relational human nature.

### **Overarching Principle of Contextualization: Enoch Wan's Relational Realism**

Enoch Wan's relational realism is an overarching framework of contextualization that comprehends reality as founded primarily in the vertical relationship between God and all creation and secondarily in the horizontal relationships within all creation. Of his idea of relational realism, Enoch Wan states:

“Ontologically, ‘relational realism’ is defined as ‘the systematic understanding that ‘reality’ is primarily based on the ‘vertical relationship’ between God and the created order and secondarily ‘horizontal relationship’ within the created order.”<sup>3</sup>

Wan's relational realism considers “relationship” as the foundation of human existence.<sup>4</sup> This relational understanding of reality provides a theoretical framework for contextualizing Christian faith in response to culture. The contextualization process depends on relationships with God and others, in accordance with Wan's relational realism.

Wan argues that God is Relational,<sup>5</sup> because Wan's idea of “relational” is derived from the Trinitarian relationship. The unique attribute of the Trinity is that God is both One and Three in the relationship. The term *perichoresis* is used to approximately describe the Trinitarian relationship. Also, horizontal relationships between humans are a secondary part of reality.

<sup>2</sup> Recently, the literature on contextualization has exploded. The author categorized contextualization models using four criteria: incarnation, scripture, direction, and holistic approach. Dean S. Gilliland, ed., *The Word among Us: Contextualizing Theology for Mission Today* (Dallas: Word Pub, 1989); Dean S. Gilliland, “Modeling the Incarnation for Muslim People: A Response to Sam Schlorff,” *Missiology: An International Review* 28, no. 3 (July 2000): 329–38, <https://doi.org/10.1177/009182960002800305>; Charles H. Kraft and Dean S. Gilliland, eds., *Appropriate Christianity* (Pasadena, Calif: William Carey Library, 2005); A. Scott Moreau, *Contextualizing the Faith: A Holistic Approach* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2018); Marc Cortez, “Context and Concept: Contextual Theology and the Nature of Theological Discourse,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 67, no. 1 (2005); Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Rev. and expanded ed, Faith and Cultures Series (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Enoch Wan and Mark Hedinger, *Relational Missionary Training: Theology, Theory & Practice* (Skyforest, CA: Urban Loft Publishers, 2017); Enoch Wan, “The Paradigm of ‘Relational Realism,’” *Occasional Bulletin* 19, no. 2 (2006).

<sup>4</sup> Enoch Wan, “Relational Theology and Relational Missiology,” *Evangelical Missiological Society, Occasional Bulletin*, 21, no. 1 (n.d.): 2.

<sup>5</sup> Wan and Hedinger, *Relational Missionary Training*, 19.

Namely, cultural anthropological understanding is a vital yet secondary element of relational realism. Because culture shapes individual and collective identity in society and church, theologians need to include an interdisciplinary approach to culture and context when theorizing theological tasks.<sup>6</sup>

Wan's paradigm of relational realism plays a significant role in the integration of the phenomenal, theological/scriptural, philosophical, and cultural dimensions involved in forming the relational self. In other words, relational realism is a theoretical framework for contextualizing the Christian faith when shaping the relational self via relationships with God/others. In light of this, this paper will address phenomenal, theological, philosophical, and cultural dimensions as they relate to relational realism.

### **Phenomenal Dimension: What's Going On?**

Contextualizing the Christian faith requires establishing a dynamic dialogue between God and ever-changing cultures. To overcome hatred and aversion arising from the pandemic context, theology needs to have the dialogical ability to contextualize the forms, contents, and praxis of Christian faith by foregrounding relationships with God/others. First, theologians and Church leaders must study the pandemic and critically reflect on our faith. In other words, what does Christian gospel mean for Asian/Asian-Americans during the coronavirus pandemic?

The coronavirus crisis has spread not only a fatal virus but also hateful ideas that have cut people off from others in socio-economic, political, and religious life. The rapidly spreading outbreak shocked the world, and the World Health Organization (hereafter, WHO) reclassified COVID-19 as pandemic on March 11, 2020. Applying the term pandemic amplified people's fears and contributed to stockpiling of toilet paper, sanitizers, and food. Shockingly, Western societies, so-called 'advanced countries,' are still stuck handling the COVID-19 crisis with widespread lockdowns and still face high fatalities. In particular, individualism and ethno-nationalism have contributed to the development of aversion and panic in many societies.

Surprisingly, individualistic faith of fundamental evangelicals is clearly unmasked in the coronavirus pandemic era. Some fundamental church leaders and members do not follow the guideline of social distance but keep attending the services. For instance, CNN recorded that members in Sold Rock Church hugged outside and did not keep social distancing. And a CNN reporter even interviewed one church member and she answered, "I'm covered in Jesus' blood, I got to the grocery store every day, they could get sick but I'm not because I'm covered in Jesus' blood."<sup>7</sup> Notably, one of representative church leaders, John Piper, emphasizes God's sovereignty and authority of the Bible but disregards others' sufferings that the coronavirus exposes in his book, *Coronavirus and Christ*.<sup>8</sup> Although God's reign is the most significant element for contextualizing Christian faith in response to the pandemic situation, God's reign is impossible to be accomplished without others' lives.

Socio-politically, ethnocentric nationalism is a fatal tool to not only build fortress of same racial or ethnic groups but also choose a target of anger and hatred as a scapegoat for avoiding

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<sup>6</sup> Wan and Hedinger, 54.

<sup>7</sup> Gary Tuchman, "Despite Warnings, Churchgoers Explain Why They're Still Going to Services," *CNN*, April 4, 2020, <https://kysdc.com/3798379/church-goer-claims-the-blood-of-jesus-protects-her-from-coronavirus/>.

<sup>8</sup> John Piper, *Coronavirus and Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020).

their fears and responsibilities. On one hand, U.S. President Donald Trump labeled COVID-19 the “Chinese virus”<sup>9</sup> in an attempt to deflect blame from the U.S. government and to drive xenophobic sentiment toward China. The ripple effects of Trump’s use of this term have included racial discrimination against and hate crimes targeted at Asians and Asian-Americans.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, Chinese people have mistreated and attacked foreign people in China because Chinese authorities and the state media have overtly stimulated sentiments that foreign people in China might spread the coronavirus.<sup>11</sup> And in an incident showing insensitivity to racial discrimination, two French doctors, Jean-Paul Mira and Camille Loch, suggested conducting trials of a tuberculosis vaccine against the coronavirus in Africa.<sup>12</sup>

In the sense, these conflicts and indifference clearly show that the world is fragmented because people are seeking to carve out their own safe spheres out of individualistic and ethno-nationalistic selfishness. Under these conditions, Asian/Asian American theologians and church leaders need to not only tackle the problem of fragmented societies but also to contextualize a Christian faith that has been infected by individualistic and ethno-nationalistic elements. This paper tackles these challenges through the practice of shaping the relational self.

### Relational Self as Self-In-Community

The Scripture makes clear that human identity is both deeply interconnected to the Triune God and influenced by relationships with others in human history. The Scripture as God’s self-revelation presents the relationship with God as the most vital element for forming the relational self. Authentically embracing the relational self then means we must faithfully engage in empathic relationships within the created order in response to the faithful relationship with God. The Scripture firmly states:

“Let **us** make humankind in **our** image, according to our likeness; and let **them** have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth. So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; **male and female** he created them.”<sup>13</sup>

Creation is a communal and communicative work of the Triune God, and God created males and females in the context of a relationship. Thus, it could be said that human identity lies not in the individual but in others in the community, as we are created as communal beings with relationships with God and others. The most significant factor in forming a relational identity is

<sup>9</sup> Chirs Cillizza, “Yes, Of Course Donald Trump Is Calling Coronavirus the ‘China Virus’ for Political Reasons,” *CNN*, March 20, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/20/politics/donald-trump-china-virus-coronavirus/index.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Caitlin O’kane, “Asian Americans Speak out after Rise in Hate Crimes during Coronavirus: ‘We Are All Human. We Are All One.’,” *CBS NEWS*, March 27, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/coronavirus-asian-americans-report-racism-anti-asian-hate-after-trum-china-daniel-dae-kim-jeannie-mai-speak-out/>; Josh Margolin, “FBI Warns of Potential Surge in Hate Crimes against Asian Americans amid Coronavirus,” *ABC NEWS*, March 27, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/fbi-warns-potential-surge-hate-crimes-asian-americans/story?id=69831920>.

<sup>11</sup> David Kirton and Engen Tham, “Foreigners Face Suspicion in China as Coronavirus Worsens Overseas,” *Reuters*, March 27, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-china-foreigners/foreigners-face-suspicion-in-china-as-coronavirus-worsens-overseas-idUSKBN21E1DU>.

<sup>12</sup> “Coronavirus: France Racism Row over Doctors’ Africa Testing Comments,” *BBC NEWS*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52151722>.

<sup>13</sup> Genesis 1:26-7(NRSV)

recognizing a deep understanding of the self-in-community to remove barriers separating oneself from others.

The question of identity, or who one is, is deeply linked to the question of who God is and who others are. The Scripture extensively relies on the concept of the relational self, identifying individuals via their relationships to God and others, for example: Image of God (Gen 1:26-27); a prophet to the nations (Jeremiah 1:5); Children of God: Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God (John 1:12; 1 John 3:1-2); friends of God (John 15:15); the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27); ambassadors for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20); the new self, created after the likeness of God (Ephesians 4:22-24); a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession (1 Peter 2:9); nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:27-28); a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19); and so on.

Diverse biblical passages on the relational self obviously guide Christians in forming a relational faith through faithfully empathizing with God and others. In other words, the authentic self in the Scripture can be found in one's relationship with God and can manifest as having sound relationships with others as one's neighbors. Individualistic and ethnocentric modes of Christian faith cannot be permitted in the Scripture, because our very existence as human beings is guaranteed by relationships themselves. Thus, forming a relational self can support us vertically, in strengthening our relationship with God, and horizontally, in establishing empathic relationships with others as neighbors, as in the Scripture. Definitely, the absorption of the human question of self into the world of the Scripture is the prescriptive criterion for establishing Christian identity in the extrascriptural world. Thus, individualism and ethnocentric nationalism in Christian faith not only impede the formation of relationships with God/others, but also absorb us into self-deception and selfishness.

### **Relational Self as Jean-Luc Nancy's idea of Being Singular Plural**

A French continental philosopher, Jean-Luc Nancy's idea of human existence is based on coexistence with the other as a unique mode of human existence. Of course, Heidegger argues the human being is confronted with nothingness and is a being that makes decisions by her/himself, without any foundation. Existence has no ground, no essence, and no certain identity. Because of this indeterminacy, human existence hovers over the abyss, and human beings have to determine their own potential for crossing over it.

However, Nancy believes that human existence is related to communion with the other. In this context, openness with others is not a unilateral action of the subject, rather, both the subject and the object open to each other. This expositional openness that uses as communication and sharing with others in the sense of ex- (out of) and position is an ontological condition that applies not only to the subject but to both the subject and the object. Thus, the exposition as being-in-common always presupposes *ensemble* related to togetherness.<sup>14</sup> Nancy regards a movement toward the other as "exposition." This term refers to that which exists outside of the self, that which exists toward the other, and that which exists in relation to the other. The idea of

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<sup>14</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, Theory and History of Literature, v. 76 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 81.

exposition is close to the way in which one can have an affinity for the other and move toward the other. When an individual-subject inclines toward the other, community can emerge.<sup>15</sup>

In this instance, for Nancy, *ensemble* refers to “being singular plural.”<sup>16</sup> Nancy says:

“This exposure, or this exposing-sharing, gives rise, from the outset, to a mutual interpellation of singularities *prior to any address in language* (though it gives to this latter its first condition of possibility).”<sup>17</sup>

Each human existence exposes the other fundamentally, and human existence can find itself in this exposure. Above all, because human beings exist in a way that is open to others, a human being exists in a plural state. From the context of plurality, Nancy creates his idea of appearance as *com-parution*.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the appearance of the other is interconnected with the emergence of plurality and creates the mode of human existence called “being-in-common” (*etre-commun*).<sup>19</sup>

However, there is no Super Being or common foundation that can include the openness of being-in-common and exposition. Rather, being-in-common exposes one to the other and separates one from the other at the same time. The negation of totality (*totalum*) is the core theme in Nancy’s philosophy. In doing so, Nancy develops a new idea of community that deposes ethnocentric nationalism as totalitarianism and avoids individualism at the same time. Nancy’s idea of being singular plural does not include a drive to accomplish individualistic and collective purposes.

This postmodern sense of being singular plural as a version of the relational self can help Christians to critically reflect on the individualistic and collective aspects of the Christian faith for embodying the kin(g)dom of God. In other words, Nancy criticizes Christians, appropriately, for consciously and unconsciously embellishing individual and collective purposes or tasks with God’s purpose, which humans cannot understand. Nancy’s criticism of individualism and ethnocentric nationalism as collectivism contributes not only to exposing human realities but also to developing his idea of being-in-common, being singular plural, and “partage,”<sup>20</sup> or sharing oneself with others.

### **Relational Self as Humaneness (仁) based on Compassion/Empathy (恕)**

The Confucian idea of humaneness (仁) is concerned with a relational notion of human dignity that is realized from the relational self. In the *Analects*, humaneness (仁) is to overcome

<sup>15</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 26–27.

<sup>16</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, Meridian, Crossing Aesthetics (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000), 48.

<sup>17</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 29.

<sup>18</sup> Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 12.

<sup>19</sup> Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 25, 43, 90.

<sup>20</sup> Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 61.

one's selfishness<sup>21</sup> and to coexist with<sup>22</sup> and to love others.<sup>23</sup> When Moore and Kim dealt with humaneness (仁), they explained this about the Chinese Character logogram, *ren* (仁): "The logogram 仁 combines two Chinese characters, 人 (a person) and 二 (two). It means that a person cannot live without others, and it indicates how people should treat one another."<sup>24</sup> In other words, a human being is relational and the Confucian core value of humaneness (仁) is concerned with fostering relationships in society. Rosemont said, "there can be no me in isolation, to be considered abstractly: I am the totality of roles I live in relation to specific others."<sup>25</sup>

Also, the Confucian idea of compassion/empathy (*shu*, 恕) is key to achieving *ren* and building an inclusive community beyond individuality. In *Analects*, Confucius clearly argued that sincere compassion/empathy (恕) is a key to reach the Way (*Dao*, 道).

“子曰、參乎、吾道一以貫之。曾子曰、唯。子出。門人問曰、何謂也。曾子曰、夫子之道、忠恕而已矣。”

"The Master said: 'Shan, my Way is penetrated by a single thread.' Ceng Zi said, 'Yes.' When the Master left, some disciples asked what he meant. Ceng Zi said, 'Our master's Way is **to be sincerely compassionate**, and that's it.'"<sup>26</sup>

Confucian ethics of benevolence are ultimately based on a relational self rather than social roles. According to Joseph C. W. Chan's analysis of Mencius, Mencius also held that people have the compassion to help others who are suffering.<sup>27</sup> In the same vein, the Confucian notion of compassion/empathy (恕) makes individuals belong to each other and ultimately achieve the Way/*Dao*. Thus, the Confucian ideas of humaneness (仁) and compassion/empathy (恕) can be contextualized in the Christian faith in service of shaping relational identity amidst the coronavirus pandemic crisis and overcoming individualism and ethnocentric nationalism.

However, there are significant differences between Christian and Confucian ideas regarding human dignity. First, the Christian idea of the relational self focuses on becoming the theonomous self rather than the autonomous self. Because God creates humans, the Christian idea of the image of God is closely related to recognition of the relational self in one's relationship with God. In this sense, the Christian idea of human dignity fully depends on the vertical relationship that exists between God and humans. This clear difference shows that Christians need to be cautious when contextualizing their faith in Confucian culture, because Confucian ideas of humaneness (仁) and compassion/empathy (恕) do not account for a relationship with God.

<sup>21</sup> Confucius, Roger T. Ames, and Henry Rosemont, *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, 1st trade pbk. ed, Classics of Ancient China (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999), 152.

<sup>22</sup> Confucius, Ames, and Rosemont, 110.

<sup>23</sup> Confucius, Ames, and Rosemont, 159–60; Mary Elizabeth Moore and Shin Myoung Kim, "Encountering Dignity: Building Human Community," *Religious Education* 113, no. 3 (May 27, 2018): 314–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2018.1456068>.

<sup>24</sup> Moore and Kim, "Encountering Dignity," 321.

<sup>25</sup> John Witte and M. Christian Green, eds., *Religion and Human Rights: An Introduction* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 168.

<sup>26</sup> Confucius, Ames, and Rosemont, *The Analects of Confucius*, 98. Bold characters are author's own translation.

<sup>27</sup> Witte and Green, *Religion and Human Rights*.

Nevertheless, the Christian faith must seek to develop a dialogue with the Confucian ideas of humaneness (仁) and compassion/empathy (恕) for the purpose of forming the relational self. God's hidden gems as general revelation in other cultures can stimulate Christians to transform the pandemic climate of the United States. That is, helping individuals from other cultures develop an understanding of the Christian relational self may help improve the climate of fear and selfishness created by the pandemic in the United States. In particular, these Confucian ideas provide Asian and Asian-American Christians who have roots in the Confucian tradition a critical resource to becoming expositional beings that are open to those who are suffering and co-suffer with them during the pandemic crisis.

## **Conclusion**

What is the role of Asians/Asian-Americans in the context of the coronavirus pandemic crisis? To transform the climate of hatred arising from the anxieties of our age, Asians/Asian-Americans must become expositional and relational beings, rather than objects seen as forever foreigners or honorary whites. As part of this process, the Christian faith of Asians/Asian-Americans should be appropriately contextualized in the context of the pandemic to aid in the formation of a relational self that can overcome individualism and ethnocentric nationalism by integrating phenomenal, theological/scriptural, philosophical, and cultural aspects based on relational realism.

In particular, the relationship with God can shed light on the philosophical and cultural dimensions of the relational self. Along the philosophical and cultural dimensions, Nancy's idea of being singular plural and the Confucian idea of humaneness (仁) based on compassion/empathy (恕) can contribute to critical reflection on individualistic and ethnocentric faith and support the relational nature of human beings. Undoubtedly, the relational self as self-in-community in the theological/scriptural dimension can be linked to these philosophical and cultural ideas. According to relational realism, Asians/Asian-Americans faithfully respond to God's calling by drawing on their self-in-community identity and empathically become relational selves that are open to others. In the response to COVID-19 pandemic crisis, Asian/Asian-American Christians must counter individualistic and ethnocentric faith that creates severe hatred for others by shaping the relational self in terms of a holistic approach.