

How Do We Deal with the Baggage of the Past?

Blessing the Nations in the 21st Century: A 3D Approach to Apostolic Ministry

by Rick Love

I sat stunned before the television as I watched the devastating terrorist attacks of 9/11. Like many others, I felt numb and angry. As I prayed and reflected over the weeks and months following this barbaric act, something in my gut told me that ministry to Muslims would never be the same. I believe God was speaking to me.

I have continued to ponder and pray. And now it is time to propose some preliminary suggestions for new models of “apostolic” ministry in the 21st century. (I define apostle as a cross-cultural disciple-maker serving in a pioneer context—a “sent one” who forms communities of Jesus’ followers where Christ is not already named.)¹ While this model comes from the Muslim world, I believe the basic principles set forth relate to all forms of apostolic ministry everywhere. I joyfully welcome critique and feedback on this article.²

Serving in a Post 9/11, Globalized, Pluralistic World

Three massive global trends have profoundly changed our world: terrorism, globalization, and pluralism. They radically impact how we live, think and communicate in the 21st century.³ They also challenge the traditional ways of doing ministry among Muslims.

The horrific terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 have deeply marked this generation. The increasing cacophony of further terrorist strikes around the world have given Muslim terrorists a high profile on the global stage. Muslims are front page news every day. Because of this, Westerners who live in the Muslim world are also of interest to the secular press. Pre 9/11, few people outside church circles were interested to know what Christians were doing in the Muslim world. But now, anyone living and working among Muslims is of interest—either because of our roles as cultural bridge builders or because we may be perceived as agitators who threaten national interests. International media are curious about our part in the supposed “clash of civilizations” between Muslims and the West.⁴

Terrorism is not the only thing that makes ministry in the Muslim world more challenging. We live in an interconnected, globalized world.⁵ Perhaps the

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most powerful and relevant example of this is the internet search engine “Google.” Type in a few words about anything and you can get a string of articles and information in seconds.

In this “google-ized” world—when ever we describe who we are, what we do, and why we do it—our words are likely to reach beyond our primary audience and enter the global marketplace of ideas.

The third trend, pluralism, refers to the existence of different ethnic, religious or political backgrounds within one society. In the past, the world was neatly divided into sending countries and mission fields. We now have Muslim neighbors in both our sending countries and mission fields. This reality is illustrated most poignantly when people speak of immigration in Europe. Terms like “Eurabia” or “Londonistan” highlight the influx of Muslims to this region of the world.

Pluralism brings us both opportunity and challenge. The influx of Muslims to countries where Christians live provides a wonderful opportunity for outreach for the church in the West. But it also presents a challenge for those who bear witness in Muslim homelands, for in Muslim countries most cross-cultural workers have a tentmaking identity, while in our sending country we are known as “missionaries.” This dual identity gets exposed by these new global realities.

Here are some examples of life in a post 9/11, globalized (=google-ized), pluralistic world:

- A Christian professor with a Ph.D. in history lives in the Middle East. He has worked hard to lecture with excellence and serve with integrity as a professor. One day, he googles his own name and is shocked and disheartened to find himself described as a missionary on the internet. A well-meaning church where he had spoken posted their Sunday bulletin on their website.

- Christian pastors conduct a seminar about Islam at a church in Australia. In addition to encouraging church members to love Muslims and reach out in friendship, they read out verses from the Qur’an or Hadith that describe how Muslims are instructed to treat infidels and women. Recent Australian converts to Islam are in attendance. They press a civil suit against the pastors under the state’s new “hate speech” laws. The pastors are convicted of “vilifying Islam.”



- Short term workers are raising funds to join a church planting team in Central Asia. Their friend writes for a small newspaper in a tiny, predominantly Christian town in North America. Their story ends up on the Internet—describing the Central Asian relief and development agency as a missionary enterprise.
- A leader in a faith-based organization serving among Muslims allows a freelance journalist to attend a seminary course he is teaching. A negative, inflammatory article results. The article is translated and reprinted throughout the Muslim world. He is invited to respond to the article in many high profile venues such as *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, CNN and 60 Minutes, but is unprepared for such high profile media attention. Later, a

community development NGO in Southeast Asia is exposed as being connected to this same faith-based organization.

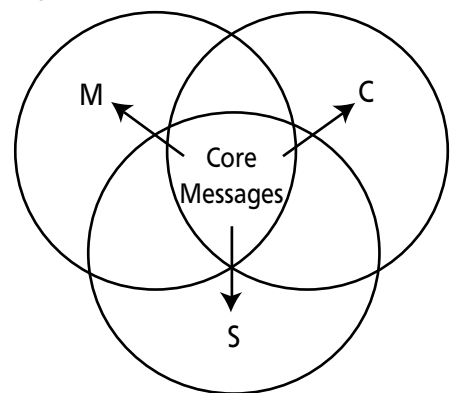
- A family serving in a Muslim country return to their sending country for a home ministry assignment. They are invited to an international student’s concert sponsored by their home church. Some students from this family’s focus country attended. With great enthusiasm a member of the “missions committee” introduced this family to international students from the same country where this family served: “We would like to introduce you to our missionaries to your country!”
- A worker in a Muslim country is speaking at a church in the West about what God is doing in the Muslim world. He is not aware that a high level official from a Muslim country is in the audience.

A 3D Approach to a Core Message

This growing globalization of communication has many positive repercussions. But it also requires those who are spokespersons for ministry among Muslims to think carefully about the way we communicate. How do we address to these new global realities?

The simple diagram below (Figure 1) illustrates what my friends and I call 3D communication. This interconnectedness and globalization means that we are increasingly challenged to do three

Figure 1: 3D Communication



things simultaneously: present the gospel (in our primary setting, to the Muslim world), defend the gospel (to the secular world listening in), recruit for the gospel (within the church).

Our communication is 3-Dimensional in that it seeks to express our core message in a way that the church (represented in the diagram by the letter “C”), the Muslim world (represented by the letter “M”) and the secular world (represented by the letter “S”) can all understand. The effects of living in a post 9/11, globalized, pluralistic world mean that we cannot communicate with each audience separately. What we say in any public setting can be heard or read around the world. In the past we could tailor our message for a particular audience, but no longer. What is spoken to one audience is overheard by others.

This model of communication emphasizes core messages that are communicated to all three audiences (the center where the circles overlap). At the same time, it acknowledges that we still communicate contextualized applications of our core message to each audience (individual circles). In addition, our contextualized messages to each audience connect back to our core messages (note that the arrow extends from the core messages to the three other audiences).

One of the greatest ways to discern the core message of your life is to answer this question: What message am I willing to die for? In my case, I would rather not die for being affiliated with a mission agency, or for American foreign policy. Frankly, I am not willing to die for the religion of Christianity. But by the grace of God, I would be willing to die for Christ and for the right of everyone to know of Christ’s love.

Globalization means that we can no longer present a different message or persona for each different audience. In the core of our being, we have to have the same message and personal identity for every audience. This doesn’t mean everyone will necessarily like the

In addition, once-cherished terms like “Christian,” “missions,” “missionary,” and “church planting” have become stumbling blocks for modern apostles.

message, but we must eliminate any perception of deception.

Our core message can be explained in different ways to the three audiences. For example, Jesus’ core message was the kingdom of God. He adapted his message to his audience, but no one ever doubted his core message, for as he said, “I have spoken openly to the world, . . . I said nothing in secret” (John 18:20). We can adapt to our audience, as long as everything we say fits with our core message.

We have a core message worth dying for if we can share that message freely with Christians, Muslims, and secularists, and if we wouldn’t mind having that message on our web sites (which will be read by all three audiences).

I have been told by many that 3D communication is impossible. The very nature of contextualization, so they say, is to focus on one audience. While this is difficult, it is possible, and I believe it is necessary in the 21st century. Recently I spoke at a church about what God is doing in the Muslim world. While my focus was on encouraging and challenging Christians, I did my best to communicate in a way that would be sensitive to a secular or Muslim audience. After my message, a Muslim (who happened to be visiting the church) came up to me and said, “Rick, thank you so much for your word this morning. This message needs to be heard throughout the United States!” I smiled and said silently, “Thank you Lord!”

Understanding 3D communication equips us to be both wise and bold. We walk in wisdom when we realize that especially in public settings (speaking at a church, writing articles or books, or posting on the internet) others will hear our message. Thus, we seek to craft our public messages so that they are relevant and sensitive to the three audiences.

However, 3D communication is not just about wisdom or relevance, it is also about boldness. The very concept of a core message motivates us to keep focused on the main thing. While the core messages of different organizations and individuals may vary, the core message for apostles is Jesus. As Paul says, “For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2).⁶

A 3D Approach to a Core Mandate

Modern missions have tended to focus on military metaphors and triumphal slogans to describe the church’s global mandate. These metaphors and slogans shape how we view the people to whom we are sent. Are they really “targets?” Does our warfare imagery subconsciously lead us to perceive Muslims as the “enemy?”

In our zeal to fulfill the great commission we have often misrepresented the way of the cross. We have depersonalized the ministry of reconciliation. We have failed to model the peaceable way of Jesus.⁷ Because of this, I have realized that I need to repent of unloving words and questionable motivation. Perhaps other Christians need to do so as well?

In addition, once-cherished terms like “Christian,” “missions,” “missionary,” and “church planting” have become stumbling blocks for modern apostles. Negative meanings have accrued to these terms. As a result, in our attempts to bring blessing to the nations, we are too easily misunderstood.

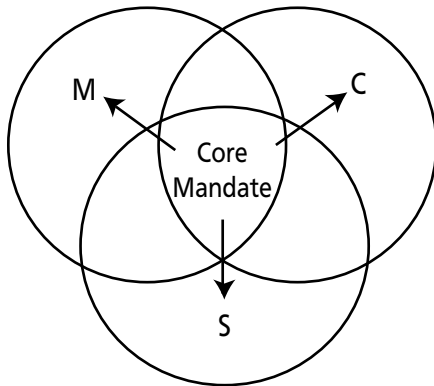
I was flying to Ireland to speak at a missions convention a few years ago. A doctoral student named Muhammad sat next to me. Our conversation was positive and stimulating as we discussed a number of spiritual and political topics. I was relaxed as I explained

to Muhammad that I was speaking at a Christian conference. But suddenly it hit me. In the folder on my lap was a flyer about a missionary conference with me as the keynote speaker. I did my best not to let the flyer fall out!

This incident illustrates the tensions we face. The term “missionary conference” can imply a design for aggressive proselytism, polemical attack’s defaming Muslim culture and history, western colonialism or imperialism. As I sat next to my Muslim acquaintance musing, I thought how much better it would be if the theme of the conference was “blessing the nations.”

The (slightly modified) diagram below (Figure 2) depicts a 3D approach to apostolic ministry. It is 3-Dimensional in that it seeks to express our core mandate in a way that the church, the Muslim world and the secular world can all understand.

Figure 2: A 3D Approach to Apostolic Ministry: A Core Mandate



The scriptural theme of “blessing the nations” is the best way to describe the core mandate of apostles.⁸ I believe this phrase should replace the term “missions.”

The following cursory survey of the Bible explains why I think this is such a central theme. Let’s start with Abraham. God’s promise to bless all nations through Abraham (Gen 12:1–3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14) provides the biblical foundation and the proper heart attitude for ministry. Here we find God’s loving purpose to bless

all nations. Here we see God’s global purposes for humanity.

In the Old Testament, “blessing” refers to God’s gracious favor and power bestowed on those who respond to him by faith (Gen 15:6; Ps 67). The blessing of His favor draws us into relationship with Himself, resulting in peace, well-being and salvation. The blessing of His power affects the practical realities of life, resulting in good harvests, long life, wealth, children and miraculous works. Thus, blessing is both a relational term and a power term.

In the New Testament, this promised blessing finds its fulfillment in Christ.⁹ In Christ, we find the fullness of God’s loving favor. In Christ, we discover the demonstration of God’s liberating power. Paul highlights the relational and power dimensions of blessing in Christ most explicitly in Galatians (Gal 3:5, 8, 9, 14).

Implicit in the Abrahamic blessing, we find both the church’s mandate and message. The Apostle Paul makes this clear in Galatians 3:8, “The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: ‘All nations will be blessed through you.’”

Paul understood the concept of blessing all nations as “good news”—the gospel in advance. In his thinking, the message (the blessing of justification by faith) and the mandate (to share this blessing with all nations) have become one. Thus, our core message is blessing in Christ and our core mandate is blessing all nations.

A 3D Approach to a Core Identity

Along with immense communicational challenges regarding our core message and mandate, apostles to Muslims also face personal identity issues. In the past many of us felt we could successfully live in two worlds with two identities. To the church we are missionaries. But to our Muslim friends we are business people, educators, relief workers, or “tentmakers” of some other sort.

The tension between this dual-identity (the work-ministry schizophrenia that many cross-cultural workers feel) has been heightened due to the interconnected world in which we live.

A high profile example: Two American women (Heather Mercer and Dayna Curry) were kidnapped in Afghanistan in 2001. After a dramatic release, they told a television reporter that they were aid workers, yet NBC immediately broadcast a prayer card that identified them as mission workers. Their two worlds collided. The same could have easily happened to many other agencies and cross-cultural disciple makers.

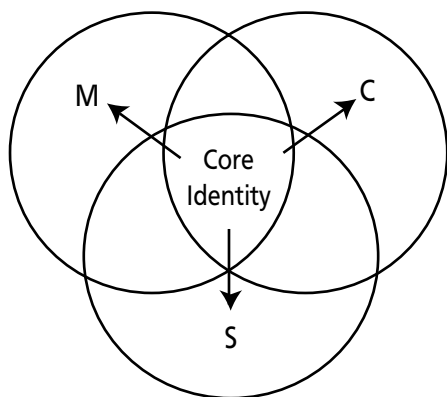
This dual identity results in low-grade anxiety for many who feel as though they are hiding their true identity and motives from their Muslim friends. They face the nagging fear that they may be found out. It also makes it hard for some cross-cultural disciple makers to maintain a clear conscience before God and man (cf. Acts 24:16). The result: lack of integrity and lack of boldness to share the gospel.

I must admit that I have needed to do some serious soul-searching regarding my own integrity before my Muslim neighbors. Perhaps I am not the only one who needs to search my soul?

The apostle Peter’s exhortations seem particularly relevant to the issues of boldness and integrity. We are commanded to “always be prepared to give an answer” to everyone who asks us to give the reason for the hope that we have (1 Peter 3:15). The context of this commands shows that our ability to respond with this kind of boldness is linked to our integrity. We are to “sanctify Christ as Lord in our hearts” and to “keep a good conscience” (1 Peter 3:15–16).

The (slightly modified) diagram on the next page (Figure 3) helps us visualize an integrated apostolic identity. Just as we have a core message and mandate among the three audiences we address (Muslim, Christian and Secular), so too we need to have a core identity.

Figure 3: A 3D Approach to Identity



No matter what role apostles to Muslims take in order to bless the communities where they live, they need to be able to fulfill that role with heart-felt integrity: “I am an English teacher-apostle for the glory of God.” “I am a businessman-apostle for the glory of God.” “I am an aid worker-apostle for the glory of God.”

Moreover, this core identity remains the same among all three audiences. Everyone has multiple roles in life (e.g., father, mother, sister, brother, child of God, apostle) and will express these roles in different ways to different people. Nevertheless, a person’s core identity best expresses who they are in the greatest number of contexts.

A core identity speaks of “integrity” and “integration”—words that come from the same Latin root: to make whole. Integrity refers to consistency between inner convictions and outward actions. We will be walking in integrity when we have “truth in the innermost being” (Ps 51:6). Honesty, sincerity, lack of deceit, and guilelessness are other ways of describing it. We cannot continue to think of ourselves as missionaries in one context and aid workers, teachers or businessmen in another. This reflects not only a split personality but a split spirituality—a false understanding that spiritual aspects of our life or our work are more important than the practical parts of life.

A “core” or integrated identity worth living for means that we have an alignment between our motivation, our tentmaking role, our personal gifting,

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and our apostolic calling. In other words, moved by the love of Christ, we seek tentmaking opportunities that fit who God has made us and allow us to carry out our apostolic calling with full integrity. If we have an integrated identity, then it will be natural for us to share our faith with greater freedom and boldness.

A core identity that fits us and is worth living for still demands wisdom! “Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” (Col 4:5–6).

Where is the line between integrity and discretion? That’s where God’s wisdom is needed. Jesus had a core message he was willing to die for: the kingdom of God. But the way he described himself and his work varied. It depended on the context and the people he addressed. Following his example and heeding his exhortation, we need to be wise as serpents, innocent as doves (Mt 10:16). Walking in integrity does not require us to reveal to everyone we meet every aspect of our lives. But in the end, we must remember that Jesus did die for his message. And he has promised that we will also share in the fellowship of his sufferings.

The type of core identity mentioned above has eluded many modern apostles for multiple reasons. Old fashioned missionary paradigms, dualistic views of the spiritual life, distorted views of tentmaking, and inadequate training are the most obvious hindrances. The scope of this paper allows us to touch only briefly on these barriers.

Let’s look at tentmaking. A cursory reading of the New Testament may seem to indicate that Paul the apostle spent very little time actually making

tents. Many people see him as a full time Christian worker who made tents only when he needed money. However, there is clear biblical evidence that he made tents on all three of his journeys and that tentmaking played a central role in his ministry (1 Cor 9:6; Acts 18:1–5; 1 Thess 2:9; 2 Thess 3:7–9; Acts 20:34–35).¹⁰

Paul trained as a rabbi at the feet of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). As a rabbi, he was trained in both the Scriptures and in a secular trade to support his ministry. He had an integrated view of work and ministry. Life, work, and ministry were all one—seamless and non-compartmentalized. Thus, he exclaimed: “Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus... Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men” (Col 3:17,23). “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31).

Because of this, tentmaking was no “cover” or mere “platform” for the ministry of Paul. Certainly, his apostolic calling was the driving force of his life—“I do all things for the sake of the gospel” (1 Cor 9:23). But just as certainly, his manual labor played a central role in the fulfillment of his calling. Paul the apostle’s long-established paradigm of tentmaker-apostle (applied more rigorously than it is in most agencies) offers surprising hope for new paradigms of ministry in the 21st century.

Conclusion

It has been more than six years since 9/11. I have gone through deep and significant personal transformation during this time, seeking to discern my own core message, core mandate and personal identity. I have also had the privilege of leading an organization through major change in these same areas.

In light of this, I would suggest that a 3D approach to apostolic ministry leads to change in the following areas:

1. *Re-theologize for the 21st century.* We must return to Scripture to find themes, terms, principles and practices to guide us.

2. *Personal Change.* Learning to communicate a core message and a core mandate in a Christ-like manner to any of the three audiences at all times is challenging. It demands change in our “wording” and in our “being.” This is even more true of modeling a core identity.

Change is another way of talking about repentance. Blessing the nations in a post 9/11, globalized world demands heart-felt repentance for many of us.

3. *Training workers like Paul*—who have integrated identities and combine credible tentmaking with fruitful disciple making—is the challenge of the 21st century.

The well established Bible School or Theological Seminary has not done well in training bi-vocational disciple makers with integrated identities because its focus has been on training those in pastoral work or full time ministry. Thus, we need training models that are more holistic and relevant to apostolic ministry.

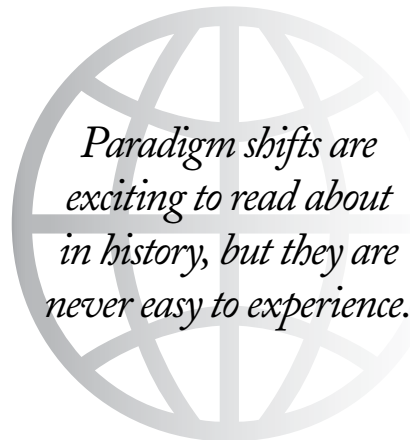
4. *Sending churches* tend to exacerbate a sense of dual identity in their workers since they embrace old missionary paradigms (and terms) and in practice only understand the role of the classic, fully supported, non tentmaking missionary. Thus, churches need to be trained in a 3D approach to ministry.

5. *Organizational changes.* A number of apostles to the Muslim world have a well established core identity on the field. However, when they return to their sending country things change. They feel the dual-identity tension as they identify with

their agency. As one brother told me, “Rick, I love my agency. But I am scared to death that one of my Muslim neighbors will find out that I am part of this agency!”

Here are some important areas to consider for organizational change:

- A. Seek to become more radically Christ-centered as an organization in word and deed.
- B. Choose more carefully the terms to describe your goals and calling on agency web sites, in mission statements and in recruiting literature.



- C. Get training in how to address the media.
- D. Encourage workers to develop an organizational identity outside of the mission agency, while remaining linked to each other through a spiritual-relational covenant.

Paradigm shifts are exciting to read about in history, but they are never easy to experience. If we believe God is truly sovereign, then we must believe that He is orchestrating global trends for His glory. So let’s work together with Him and make the changes necessary to fulfill our calling to bless all nations!

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Endnotes

¹ See Sinclair 2005 pp 1–14 for an excellent summary of apostleship.

² You can contact me at rllove@fimtld.org.

³ Two other massive global trends that affect the expansion of God’s kingdom are beyond the scope of this paper: the rise of the church in the global south, and post-modernity.

⁴ See Samuel P. Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* Viking Publications, 1997. I disagree with many points in Huntington’s book but his thinking is influential and worth noting.

⁵ Thomas Friedman’s *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* and *The World is Flat* are two of the best books available about globalization.

⁶ Paul the apostle linked his apostolic aims and ambitions with the gospel. His

“apostolic self-description” indicates that his goal was the gospel. His work resulted in communities of Jesus’ followers. He loved and suffered for these communities of faith. But he linked his apostolic aims and ambitions with the gospel:

Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God. (Rom 1:1 NASB)

However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace. (Acts 20:24 NIV)

And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named, so that I would not build on another man’s foundation. (Rom 15:20 NASB)

I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it. (1 Cor 9:23 NASB)

I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness... (Col 1:25)

To me, the very least of all saints, this grace [of apostleship] was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ. (Eph 3:8)

But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me, so that through me the proclamation might be fully accomplished, and that all the Gentiles might hear; and I was rescued out of the lion’s mouth. (2 Tim 4:17)

⁷ See Love 2001 for a summary of these important issues.

⁸ See Love and Taylor 2007.

⁹ The New Testament describes the gospel in terms of blessing in five passages:

And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, ‘Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.’ When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways. (Acts 3:25–26)

David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him. (Rom 4:6–8)

The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to

Abraham: ‘All nations will be blessed through you’ (Gal 3:8).

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’ He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit (Gal 3:13).

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ (Eph 1:3).

¹⁰ See especially Lai and Love 2007. See also Barnett 1993, Everts 1993 and Hock 1980.