



ECPM FOUNDATION

RELATIONAL THINKING AND A BIBLICAL VISION FOR SOCIETY

Jonathan Tame



*A plain and simple introduction to
"relationalism"*



“Part of the problem is that Christians are too bound up with single-issue politics - abortion or euthanasia or Sunday trading. There are two reasons why we must go beyond single-issue politics. First, if we focus on a few single issues it leaves much of public policy debate without a Christian influence. And, second, it's very difficult to win an argument on a single issue without putting those issues into a wider context and showing how they are part of a wider social vision. Now, where is that wider social vision to be found?”

- Michael Schluter”



DO WE STILL NEED A ‘BIG IDEA’?

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 marked a watershed in history. From then on, capitalism in one form or another was the only show in town, and the era of rival grand narratives in politics was over. Now, what is good is what works; policy should be assessed only on pragmatic criteria. This tectonic shift 30 years ago ushered in an era of pluralistic societies living with multiple visions of what is socially desirable.

However, this pragmatic approach has problems. It takes a long time to observe the full ef-

fects of policy, so pragmatism is experimentally hazardous. More fundamentally, policies are seldom if ever value-neutral. Pension provision, for example, involves a choice between individual, family and state responsibility. The tax and benefit system may support marriage or make cohabitation more financially attractive. A policy platform built on a case-by-case approach is likely to be full of internal contradictions.

Since market economics triumphed after the fall of communism, there have been few attempts to outline a coherent social vision. The grand vision for an ever-closer union of European states was accelerated after the creation of a common currency, the euro. However, following the expansion of the EU eastwards in 2004 and 2007, the great financial crisis of 2007/08 and the migrant crisis of 2015, anti-EU sentiment has been growing. The rise of nationalist and far right parties in European and domestic elections indicate that the post-war consensus around liberal, democratic values in the Western world may be crumbling. Is it time to revisit the need for a ‘big idea’ for society? This is the same question which led to the foundation of the Jubilee Centre and the ideas expressed in this book.

SEEKING AN ALTERNATIVE TO CAPITALISM, MARXISM AND SOCIALISM

Jubilee Centre’s story began in East Africa in

the 1970s, where its founder Michael Schluter was part of an ideological discussion about development and nation-building at the church he attended in Nairobi. Which of the different approaches to national and economic development around them was the closest to the Bible? Was it the African socialist model in Tanzania, the capitalist system pursued in Kenya or the radical Marxist approach in Ethiopia? Meanwhile, contemporary Christian reflection in Britain centred on identifying biblical principles to critique public policy. The Left stressed justice; the Right stressed stewardship. However, such general principles were inadequate to evaluate newly independent nations in post-colonial Africa.

Michael was encouraged to take a fresh look at Old Testament law as an ethical foundation for public life. New Testament ethics were given largely to Christians; they assume the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit and were given to guide individuals and the church rather than societal behaviour. So the command by Jesus to 'turn the other cheek' is not an appropriate basis for sentencing armed robbers in a law court. Jesus himself points to OT law as the God-given source of ethical teaching when urging his disciples to act as salt and light in society, in the tradition of the prophets (Matthew 5:11-20).

A careful and judicious reading of the political, economic and social system contained in the Law of Moses proved a rich and rewarding study. Although the laws appeared at first sight to be a random collection, closer examination revealed remarkable internal consistency. Here was a coherent pattern of political economy which had self-evident relevance to the questions posed in East Africa in the late 20th century.

OVERCOMING THE OBJECTIONS

When suggesting that biblical law (defined as 'an integration of different instructional genres of the Bible which together express a vision of society ultimately answerable to God'¹) can provide a framework for public policy, people raise a host of reasons why we should not seek to apply it to life today. Four of the more important objections are:

i) 'Biblical law has no continuing role in the New Testament'

A superficial reading of the New Testament makes it appear that OT law has been made redundant by the coming of Jesus. But Jesus insists that he has not come to abolish the Law (Matthew 5:17) and Paul elsewhere says that 'the Law is good if one uses it properly' (1 Timothy 1:8). Biblical law was intended to generate Israel's social organisation and ethical distinctiveness, which was part of its calling to be 'a light to the Gentiles' (Isaiah 42:6).

ii) 'There is no mandate for Christians to promote biblical law in society today'

The immediate answer lies in the incentive offered by Jesus, 'anyone who practises and teaches these commands will be great in the kingdom' (Matthew 5:19). There is an intrinsic link between law and kingdom. As Paul says, the law was put in charge to bring us to Christ (Galatians 3:24). However, if the kingdom is only where the rule of Christ is acknowledged in people's hearts, what is Christ's relationship with the rest of humanity? The New Testament claims that Christ's reign is over all humanity, both as creator and as redeemer, whether people recognise it or not (Matthew 28:20). So Christians have God-given authority to challenge society with both law – rightly applied – and gospel.

iii) *'Biblical law upholds a society based on patriarchy and slavery'*

The gender issue in OT law is complex and significant allowance must be made for the cultural context of the Ancient Near East. In agricultural societies generally, land inheritance cannot pass down through both sons and daughters or plots would become more quickly subdivided and scattered. This was clearly an issue in Israel, and when there was no male heir, an exception could be made as in the case of Zelophehad's daughters (Numbers 27). However, although men inherited property, women could hold prominent roles in managing their households (such as Abigail in 1 Samuel 25 or the noble woman in Proverbs 31) and could be leaders in the Israelite community (such as Miriam and Deborah).

With respect to slavery, Israel's institution was a far cry from life in ancient Greece or Rome. Slaves in Israel were allowed to run away (Deuteronomy 23:15-16) and were released every seventh year (Deuteronomy 15:12-15). Indeed, OT slavery is more like a domestic service contract, albeit giving considerable power to the householder. It was in effect punishment in the community for a thief or a person in debt (Exodus 22:3) and was probably in most cases more humane than the social exclusion and enforced inactivity of a modern prison.

iv) *'It is not clear which parts of biblical law should be applied today'*

While many of the laws and their penalties are part of Israel's ceremonial law, and thus are fulfilled in Christ and no longer binding on the Christian (e.g. the food laws), Jesus insists no part of the Law can be entirely dismissed on grounds of cultural irrelevance (Matthew 5:17). The reformers' categories of moral, civil and ceremonial law are helpful if seen to describe

different purposes rather than different types of law. One specific command, to keep the Sabbath holy, for example, may be regarded simultaneously as having moral, civil and ceremonial functions. It is the moral-civil function of the Law, not its role as a sign of the OT covenant (Exodus 31:13), which is relevant to the ordering of society today.

WHAT PRINCIPLES FOR POLITICAL ECONOMY?

The next question is to ascertain which principles of biblical law could be applied today, in a largely secular context. The following are worthy of consideration:

- The foundation of the state should be a covenant or promise between regions or sections of society which binds the parties together for good or ill, as in a marriage, so that there is commitment to resolving disputes rather than resorting to force or withdrawal.
- The extended family should be given as great a role as possible to ensure its long-term cohesion. This should include economic and welfare functions as well as provision of emotional support, and nurture and education of children.
- All extended families should have geographic roots in a physical location and some permanent stake in property. This helps to ensure proximity of family members and stable local communities, and also some equality in social relationships while still allowing differences in levels of income and wealth.
- Surplus money should be channelled as far as possible within extended families and communities where returns are non-finan-

cial, or provided as equity capital to business so that risk is shared fairly between suppliers and users of capital.

- Crime should be regarded not as the individual breaking the rules of the state, but as a breakdown of relationship between offender and victim, and between offender and local/national community.
- The power of central government should be restrained to ensure participation of people in decisions governing their lives. ‘Subsidiarity’ encourages direct political involvement and helps develop relationships within the local community.
- National unity is to be built not on military or executive centralisation, but on a national system of law, education and medicine informed by shared values and aspirations.

These principles were found to be mutually reinforcing; they form a pattern of political and economic organisation.

IDENTIFYING THE ‘BIG IDEA’ OF BIBLICAL LAW

However, one issue remains outstanding: what holds all these laws together? What is the central theme of the pattern found in biblical law, which could aid its application to contemporary societies? The answer is as simple as it is profound. After replying to a slightly different question from a lawyer, Jesus went on to address directly this question:

‘Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?’ Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and

greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.’ Matthew 22:36-40

Love, of course, is not the language of finance or economics: it is the language of relationships. God measures a society, Jesus says, not by the size of its GDP or by the efficiency of its markets, but by the quality of its relationships. Such a finding is hardly surprising. Christianity is a relational religion, built around the doctrine of the Trinity. John points out that God is not an isolated individual living in a silent universe. Rather, ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God’ (John 1:1). As John Zizioulas has observed:

‘The chief lesson is that if God is essentially relational, then all being shares in relation: there is, that is to say, a relational content built into the nature of being. To be is to exist in relation to other beings.’²

Other aspects of Christian doctrine are equally focused on relationships. The central term ‘covenant’ is a promise which establishes and shapes a relationship. The atonement is explained by Paul as bringing about reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-19), the restoration of a broken relationship. Eternal life is a developing relationship (John 17:3). Paul teaches that spiritual gifts, knowledge and generosity to the poor are worth nothing without the right quality of relationships (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

From the moment of conversion, the individual is called to become part of a new community and not to live or act in isolation (e.g. Ephesians 2:19). The language of relationships is pervasive in Christian doctrine and experience.

RELATIONSHIPS: WHAT RELEVANCE TO PUBLIC POLICY?

It is not immediately obvious how the focus on relationships can be used to develop new approaches to diverse areas such as economic policy, financial services, healthcare provision or the prison system. However, the Jubilee Centre had an opportunity to learn how to do this in the UK context when it led the Keep Sunday Special Campaign from 1985 onwards, which opposed Margaret Thatcher's plan to deregulate Sunday Trading in Britain. To have any chance of winning, a wide coalition of retailers and trade unions had to be brought together to work with churches and concerned individuals.

When addressing such a coalition, it was not possible to use explicitly Christian arguments. The case had to rest on preserving family life, protection of low-paid shopworkers from pressure to work unsocial hours, and environmental factors. These are hinted at in Scripture as reasons for the Sabbath institution (e.g. Deuteronomy 5:15; Exodus 20:11). This approach was consistent with Christian teaching but didn't rely on adopting specifically Christian language. It was to provide a model for the future in how to balance the need to involve the wider world in seeking social reform while remaining faithful to biblical ideals.

In seeking to write a book that examined systematically the impact of public policy on people's relationships,³ Michael Schluter and David Lee realised that the contemporary language around relationships was inadequate for this task. So they developed the concept of 'relational proximity' in contrast to 'relational distance'; any given relationship had an optimum level of proximity, which could be evaluated using five facets or dimensions of interpersonal relation-

ship. These were:

- quality of communication (directness)
- frequency, regularity and amount of contact, and length of relationship (continuity)
- variety of context of meetings and encounters (multiplexity)
- mutual respect and fairness in the relationship (parity)
- shared goals, values and experience (commonality)⁴

A later opportunity to work with the Scottish Prison Service to assess the quality of relationships between prison officers and prisoners led to the development of a formal measurement tool based on relational proximity. This tool has since been applied in companies and homes for the elderly, and between organisations in Britain's National Health Service. Although without explicit biblical foundation, relational proximity grew out of reflection on the reasons behind many biblical laws, and helped to identify the impact of much biblical law on the structure of neighbour relationships. These biblical roots have been explored systematically by Guy Brandon.⁵

Many features of Western society today undermine relational proximity. High levels of mobility make it difficult for people to develop close relationships with neighbours. Social media has the effect of dividing our time among more and more people, so that each contact tends to become more superficial; video streaming and music culture often inhibit conversation; urban planning norms and high-rise buildings have lessened opportunities for people to have frequent contact; the large size of companies and financial institutions threatens mutual respect and fairness in relations with customers and

suppliers.

The relational approach can be used to critique legislation and the structures and working practices of organisations. It offers an alternative ethos for sectors of public policy, for example relational justice for the criminal justice system, relational schools and relational healthcare.⁶ It can also provide a basis for relational companies in the business sector.⁷ In these and other ways the relational approach, informed by biblical principles, can provide a reform agenda for public life.

RELATIONAL LIFESTYLE

The relationships theme overcomes the artificial divide between justice in public life and virtue in private life. Christians wishing to think and act relationally in their lives at work and at home will study the life of Jesus, who shows us how to relate to God and to other people perfectly, both by his life and in his teaching. This covers every area of life. Agape, or unconditional, love is the ultimate goal for the Christian (1 John 4:7-12).

The primary requirement of a relational lifestyle is the need for long-term, deep, committed relationships. These will generally be focused within the extended family but also reach outside it. To achieve such relationships, roots are critical; this is why teaching about the Jubilee, which is primarily concerned with maintaining roots, is foundational to the social structure of OT law.

Time can be seen as the currency of relationships. In society today, smart phones and social media facilitate contact with greater numbers than ever before, but such wider contact is generally characterised by greater superficiality. To have a few close and deep friends, inside and outside the extended family, it is essential to prioritise relationships. Jesus sets relational priorities in his ministry after much prayer (e.g. Mark 3:13-17; 5:37) and his relationship with his Father

in heaven always takes priority over all other relationships (e.g. Mark 1:35-7).

Close friendship, however, is more than a commitment to roots and prioritising of relationships. It involves sacrificial (agape) love, a willingness always to forgive, and an ability to expose one's innermost thoughts and feelings to another person. Such self-exposure is often painful, always risky. The experience of deep and painful relationships has enriched much of the greatest literature and art, including Goethe's poetry, Solzhenitsyn's novels and Rossetti's painting.

RELATIONAL THINKING: SECULAR IDEOLOGY OR CHRISTIAN STRATEGY?

Does Relational Thinking (sometimes referred to as 'Relationism') have the ideological ambitions of capitalism and socialism? Such a suggestion immediately rings alarm bells for Christians. Ideologies smack of idolatry, solutions apart from salvation, and frameworks of political thought and action which do not acknowledge the Lordship of Christ. While Relationism could perhaps be regarded as an ideology in the sense of flowing from a worldview which is not shared by everybody, it should certainly not be regarded as an autonomous body of human thought.

The Relationships Foundation was established as a sister organisation to Jubilee Centre in 1993 as a catalyst to help make Britain into a more relational society. It is based on Christian values, but does not require any theological beliefs of its supporters. Following the earlier model of the Keep Sunday Special Campaign, the Relationships Foundation simply states that it is founded on the ethical or relational values of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Thus its framework can be endorsed by any who recognise the

central importance of good relationships for human well-being, and who are persuaded by rational argument or intuition that the underlying principles are sound, regardless of their source. So Relational Thinking is less than a fully Christian framework of thinking. By focusing on love for neighbour exclusively, it fails to require the first commandment: to love God. The absence of the vertical dimension of relationships means that the essential motivation for building strong social bonds and restoring broken relationships, even at personal cost, is missing. However, in seeking to influence a society where Christians are a minority, Christians cannot appeal to the first commandment, to love God, in the way that the OT prophets did. Such an appeal today is the task of evangelism. The most Christians can hope for in a pluralist society is to persuade people of the benefits of biblical social teaching, and thus to have national laws based on Christian rather than secular values.

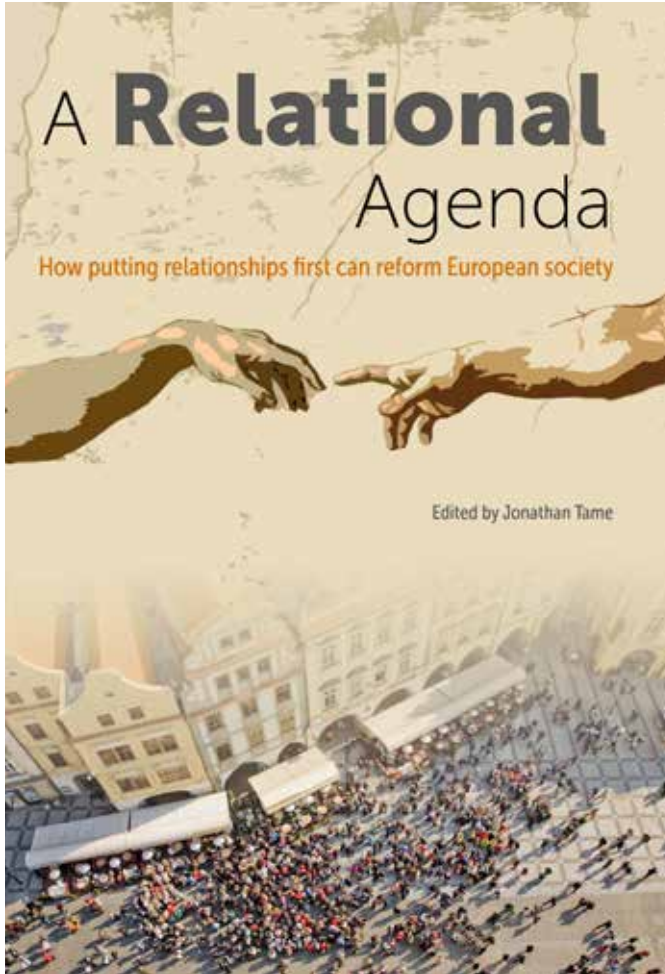
In addition, by focusing public policy and personal lifestyle on the issue of relationships, Relational Thinking speaks in the categories and language of Christianity. It has been termed a 'translation strategy', helping to express in contemporary, secular terms many of the core concerns of biblical teaching.

PROMOTING RELATIONAL THINKING IN THE 21ST CENTURY

For those who are convinced that it is possible to derive a biblically based agenda for political, economic and social reform using the relational approach, it is essential not just to analyse what is wrong in society but also to try and change it positively. Jesus called us not to be passive on-lookers, but to be active as salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16). The task is immense.

Western societies are locked into an individualistic and consumerist worldview which is reinforced by the priorities of giant global corporations, especially through advertising, and by the preoccupation of political parties with economics and human rights. The centralisation of state power and individualisation of financial services (e.g. pensions, insurance, savings) provide further reinforcement. How can this stranglehold be broken?⁸

The day of the think tanks is passing away; it is no longer sufficient simply to promote ideas at an intellectual level. Policy is made increasingly after practical experiment, pilot schemes and regional initiatives. If Relational Thinking, or Relationism, is accepted as a strategy for Christian political and personal engagement, we can expect widespread reform initiatives at national, regional and local levels based on the framework it provides. Those in national and local politics, in business and financial services, in the professions and in caring roles will work towards a fresh vision and with a renewed agenda. Whether Relational Thinking has a long-term impact on Western society will depend primarily on whether it stays in touch with its biblical roots. Divorced from biblical teaching, it will lack the coherence and cutting edge derived from the wisdom of God's revelation in Scripture. It will also fail to attract and sustain the support of Christians who recognise explicitly or intuitively the truth and wisdom of its approach. If constantly renewed with the insights of biblical reflection, it may successfully challenge the current dominant Western ideologies.



A COLLECTION OF FIVE REPORTS:

- **JUBILEE ROADMAP**
- **RELATIONAL THINKING AND CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING**
- **CRUMBLING FOUNDATIONS**
- **ARTIFICIALLY INTELLIGENT**
- **JUST PAY**
- **EDITED BY JONATHAN TAME**

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THE COMPONENT PARTS OF THIS BOOK

The five parts of this book develop a broader introduction to Relational Thinking, and were published originally as separate booklets in Jubilee Centre's Long Distance Christian series between 2012 and 2018.

The Jubilee Roadmap articulates a positive vision of society rooted in biblical ideals – most notably the practices and impacts of the Jubilee year. It also condenses the Jubilee Centre's thinking on how a biblical, relational framework can be applied to contemporary society. It suggests that two alternative directions of travel can be taken by policy makers: one that accepts the prevailing ideology of individualism, while the other promotes a society based on good and just relationships. These contrasting directions are illustrated with reference to eight major themes: Family, Property, Community, Government, Finance and the Economy, Work and Rest, Welfare and Justice.

Relational Thinking and Catholic Social Teaching goes on to compare and contrast two perspectives on Christian social engagement. Catholic Social Teaching is a school of thought originating in the 1891 papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum* and has influenced Christian Democratic political parties across Europe for over a century. Relational Thinking is more recent and draws from a particular interpretation of biblical law. This section explores ways the two perspectives might complement each other in helping Christians to engage in the social, political and economic challenges which Europe currently faces.

The other three sections move from general considerations to three specific areas where Relational Thinking can be applied – to finance,

technology and business. *Crumbling Foundations* is a biblical critique of modern money. Although there has been much discussion of the nature of capitalism and the shortcomings of the banking sector following the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, there has been less analysis and critique of the monetary system that underpins our economies. The way we create money now – involving a complex interplay between central and commercial banks, electronic and physical cash – is a far cry from the Bible's use of silver and grain as currencies. Nevertheless, this section argues that the Bible's principles are eternal and have ongoing application in creating monetary systems that are both just and fit for purpose.

Artificially Intelligent? dispels some of the sensationalism around Artificial Intelligence, asking instead how a fresh understanding of humanity can shape the trajectory of AI development. It draws on research interviews from ten leading AI practitioners and thinkers, and provides a distinctly biblical framework for understanding this new wave of technology. Addressing all levels of expertise, the insights and guidelines provided are intended to enable Christian leaders in church, business and public service to make informed responses to AI that are rooted in their faith.

Finally, *Just Pay?* proposes a biblical framework for exploring the topic of remuneration – how much people should be paid at both the top and the bottom of a business or organisation. After explaining how remuneration decisions are made, the section introduces three major themes, drawn from biblical reflection – justice, dignity and reward. Justice is concerned with the fair amount of pay, to ensure families are protected from destitution. Dignity is con-

cerned with the right kind of work and protects the agency of workers. Finally, reward is about working for the right reasons, and work which leads to the common good. Together, they provide new insight into the ethics and relational implications of remuneration.

Although these pages only offer a limited range of examples of how Relational Thinking can be put into practice in today's world, and the emphasis is primarily on the UK, it is hoped that this book will provide an inspiring introduction to a biblically-based framework and strategy which can contribute significantly to social reform in European societies in the 21st century.

Jonathan Tame
 Executive Director, Jubilee Centre
 Cambridge 2019

Endnotes

- 1 Jonathan Burnside, *God, Justice and Society* (New York: OUP 2011), p.xxii
- 2 Report of the BCC Study Commission on Trinitarian Doctrine Today, *The Forgotten Trinity* (British Council of Churches, London, 1989), p. 16.
- 3 Michael Schluter and David Lee, *The R Factor* (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1993).
- 4 These ideas have been explored in depth in John Ashcroft et al, *The Relational Lens: understanding, measuring and managing stakeholder relationships* (CUP, Cambridge, 2017)
- 5 See www.jubilee-centre.org/relational-proximity-biblical-perspective/
- 6 See the 'r thinking' menu option at www.relationshipsfoundation.org
- 7 See www.relationshipsfoundation.org/publications/transforming-capitalism-from-within/
- 8 See Calum Samuelson, *The Steering Wheel: Confronting the ideologies driving the West*; available at www.jubilee-centre.org/steering-wheel/

AUTHOR



Jonathan Tame has been the director of the Jubilee Centre since January 2012, after working for two years with Jubilee Centre's sister organisation *Relational Research*. Before that, he spent 11 years in Romania and 8 in Switzerland leading community development and cultural engagement projects with *Youth With A Mission*. He holds a masters degree in agricultural economics, his wife Helene is a community chaplain, and they have five children.

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“Sallux has supported us to find our way in the European Union and to reach out to European decision makers, and to create our common declaration with the Yezidi and the Turkmen. We thank Sallux for their work.”

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CONTACT

Sallux | ECPM Foundation
Bergstraat 33

3811 NG Amersfoort
The Netherlands

 +31 33 3040012

 info@sallux.eu

 @Sallux_Official

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