



Long Distance
Christian

Two perspectives on
Christian social engagement:

Catholic Social Teaching and Relational Thinking



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Preface

In October 2014 a group of 30 senior Christian leaders from business, politics, the Church and civil society met in Caux, Switzerland, to explore the decline of personal and corporate responsibility across Europe and the intellectual and spiritual causes of this trend. They went on to consider how an alternative culture of relational responsibility might be promoted, drawing on the emerging perspective of 'Relational Thinking'.

Participants came from Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox backgrounds, and during discussions several references were made to similarities between Relational Thinking and aspects of Catholic Social Teaching and the common good. Consequently, two of the organising partners (Jubilee Centre and Sallux) decided to undertake further research, and to explore ways the two perspectives might complement each other in helping Christians to engage in the social, political and economic challenges which Europe currently faces.

This report is the fruit of that initiative. Mathias Nebel and Paul Dembinski took the lead from the Catholic Social Teaching side, and Guy Brandon and Michael Schluter responded from the perspective of Relational Thinking.

The two papers that form this booklet are intended by the authors to be the first part of a conversation which they hope to develop further through a series of events during 2017 and beyond.

The authors would welcome any reflections or comments on these two papers; please write to them via info@jubilee-centre.org.

Given that the post-war political settlement in Europe is under mounting threat, this is an opportune time to look for fresh ideas rooted in Christian social teaching, so that the church can keep renewing her mandate to be salt that doesn't lose its saltiness.

Jonathan Tame

Executive Director, Jubilee Centre

Relational Thinking and Catholic Social Teaching

Convergences and Contrasts

**Mathias Nebel and
Paul Dembinski**

The purpose of this article is straightforward. As the title states it will compare and contrast two traditions of thought, namely Catholic Social Teaching (CST) and Relational Thinking (RT). It will proceed first by stating the differences existing between the two corpuses of texts in scope, purpose and method. Yet the comparison also discloses a no less obvious complementarity between the two corpuses. Both are deeply rooted in the Bible and western Christian tradition. The second part investigates the convergence existing between the two approaches. Finally, the article will try to find in the notion of the common good a way to bridge the two traditions of thought. The understanding of the dynamic of the common good may help refine Relational Thinking; whereas relational analysis may help Catholic Social Teaching reach the level of action and policies.

I Two corpuses of texts

Relational Thinking

Relational Thinking (RT) is a movement. As such it is deeply rooted in the experiences and intuitions of key individuals sharing a conviction: the idea that societies are built and survive on the quality of their relational capital. First among them is probably Michael Schluter. When explaining the origins of the many initiatives now covered by this approach, it is his own experience that he sets in the foreground¹. In an article from 1997, he explains the need he had while in Africa to seek an alternative to the dominant capitalist, Marxist or socialist approach to development. A careful reading of the Bible brought about the 'big idea' that the human condition is one of created beings who are in relationship one with another; relationships through which we are called to learn to love.

This biblical discovery - that love is the ultimate achievement of human relationships, and God's creating and saving love brings human loves to their fulfilment within the eternal communion of God's own Trinitarian relationships - was the genesis of RT. Yet it was in the Old Testament that Michael Schluter discovered the relationship between Israel and God, framed within a Covenant and a Law. The legal, social and economic order organizing the community was not indifferent to its relationship to God. The Covenant was both a law governing the relationship to God and a law covering the relationships between the people of Israel. This is the second element of the 'big idea': the quality of relationships matters to our society - the quality of the relationships generated by law, institutions and policies are not indifferent to the Christian faith.

The Covenant was both a law governing the relationship to God and a law covering the relationships between the people of Israel!

This intuition has since then been brought to politics and action, developing into what is now Relational Thinking. Crucial to it was the book Michael Schluter and David Lee published in 1993: *The R Factor*. Here, the question of how to translate and enact RT in the public square is considered. God's covenant and love can't be established in a pluralistic society as the axis of political engagement. But the quality of relationships can; the quality of social bonds matters to the State and to citizens. As an outcome of this book, the Relationships Foundation was created. Applying the first elements

of relational analysis to concrete political action, the Foundation launched several campaigns and initiatives - 'Keep Sunday Special' (1986), 'Credit Action' (1988), 'Citylife (Allia)' (1996), 'NPI' (Newick Park Initiative) (1987), 'Relational Analytics' (2015), 'Relational Peacebuilding Initiatives' (2015), etc. Out of this flourishing activity, many books and articles have emerged, from which four have been reviewed for this article: *The R Factor* (1993), *Building a Relational Society* (1996), *Jubilee Manifesto: a framework, agenda & strategy for Christian social reform* (2005), and *The Relational Lens* (2016). This is the corpus that will be under review in this article (see bibliography for full references).

Catholic social teaching

The corpus of texts known as Catholic Social Teaching does not form a fully coherent 'doctrine' as many would like to think. It is more a tradition of interpretation: a collection of texts representing the effort by the magisterium of the Catholic Church to be attentive to the surge of God's Kingdom among

Catholic Social Teaching is the effort made by a living Church to understand among the many social changes and challenges faced by our times, where God's Kingdom calls Christians to engagement.

the many changes of modern society². As in any tradition of thought, you will find a real and conscious continuity between the texts and at the same time some stark inflexions brought in by popes with different sensibilities and by the historical twist of events capturing the attention of the international community. Thus the coherence and continuity of the texts is mainly grounded in the reference to one and the same Christian, Catholic faith as the starting point of interpretation.

It is commonly understood that the basic corpus of text making up Catholic Social Thought begins with Pope John XXIII's encyclical *Rerum novarum* (1891) on the condition of industrial workers and leads to the latest social encyclical issued by the current pope (Pope Francis, *Laudato sí*, 2015). However, the corpus can be extended well beyond these texts and includes the different written reflections and reactions as well as the practice of Catholic charities around the world. Many important texts issued by Bishop Conferences are considered as part and parcel of this tradition of thought (*Justice for all* US Bishop conference, 1985; *The common good*, UK Bishop conference, 1996; *The many faces of globalisation*, German Bishops conference, 1991). The point is, Catholic Social Teaching is the effort made by a living Church to understand

among the many social changes and challenges faced by our times, where God's Kingdom calls Christians to engagement.

Thus over the last 125 years Catholic Social Teaching has engaged many different topics: industrial labour conditions, workers' syndicates, just pay, the family, the poor, the limits of private property, the common good and the call for justice, solidarity, integral development, globalisation, the financial crisis, and to today's present challenges of climate change. No single document can be said to encompass the full teaching. But each one enriches the previous one and contributes to a Christian reading of the many realities of our present social life.

2 Convergences and overlaps

The importance of relationships

Catholic Social Teaching does not include *relationships* as one of its major categories or even as a term used in its texts. Although relationships are of utmost importance to Catholic theology, there is no *per se* analysis of the *dynamic of personal relationships* in CST and no special emphasis is put on institutions and policies that would affect them in that corpus. But despite this, *social relationships* are the one and central topic of CST: workers and capital, State and citizens, children and school systems, families and social policies, poor and rich, transnational corporations and consumers, human rights uniting human beings, etc. All of these relationships make up the core concern of CST.

These are complex, institutionalized relationships. Unlike close and personal face-to-face relationships, they need a certain amount of *institutional mediation* in order to exist. A *third party* is needed to mediate personal relationships; a third party which, in most cases, turns out to be an institution. It can be the market as an institution between producer and consumers, or the judge mediating quarrelling parties. But it can also be a personal third party: Christ unites through time and history all human beings in his person. Solidarity, justice, responsibility and integral development all, in CST, involve this theological mediation. It is through the person of Christ that we can all

be said to be brothers and sisters. It is in Christ's love that the call for justice opens to mercy, reconciliation and peace. It is in Christ that the hope for the common good can be maintained as the goal of politics.

Yet social relationships are manifold. They can't be reduced to a one-size-fits-all. Work relationships can't be reduced to the rights and duties foreseen by the Law. A human solidarity grounded in our common dignity does not preclude that at another level, private property might not only be legitimate but also required. What is true for family relationships – gratuity, benevolence and non-reciprocity - might not work as the main objective of international relations between States. It is therefore easy to understand why even social relationships are not theorised *per se* in CST.

The economy, politics, culture and law must be understood as but another dimension of our relationship to our neighbour and to God.

But if the multiplicity and heterogeneity of social relationships must be acknowledged, they all belong to one and the same dynamic: that of God's love that created the world and is leading it to its eschatological fulfilment.

The many social relationships and institutions are ordained towards a same and unique end which is God's love. It is a dynamic ordering and one which mostly escapes human understanding. It is God's work in our history, a hidden but nonetheless real and progressive achievement of all human relationships so that the good of the person and the good of the human community does not differ anymore. However, this ordering does not occur like some sort of natural or cosmological fulfilment. God's work is incarnated: it occurs among us and with us and even through us. God's ordering of all things toward their ultimate end involves the participation of humankind. All human progress towards the eschatological common good is actually our human participation in the progressive emergence of God's Kingdom.

Nowhere in CST is that vision better explained than in *Gaudium et spes* (1965). In drafting the role of the Church in today's world, the Second Vatican Council began with a tryptic. The first chapter recalls the personal relationships between human beings and God, created in His image and semblance and called to stay in His love. The second chapter then develops how this intimate, personal relationship to God necessarily involves and opens to others. Social relationships are part and parcel of our relationship to God. The economy, politics, culture and law must be understood as but another dimension of our relationship to our neighbour and to God. Christ is shown here as the ultimate

common good of humanity. Then, the third chapter reaches for action. It shows how our participation in God's salvific action is required; how we are to seek justice, solidarity, the common good among us as much as we seek in our inner life to reach to God's love. A Christian life is a life engaged in all the relationships through which God's love reaches its fulfilment.

Relational Thinking (RT) shares many of the previous elements with CST. This comes as no surprise. Both are rooted in the Judaeo-Christian tradition and refer to the same biblical texts. So when Graham Cole³ describes the origins of the 'big idea' of relationships he gives an overview of the Christian faith in terms of relationships: a *relational God* (Trinity), a *relational humanity* (given itself in relationships and called to a relationship to God), a *relational rupture* (sin as the dynamic breakdown of relationships), a *relational restoration* (in the person of Christ a new and unexpected relationship to God and between human beings is opened to humankind). This enunciation of Christian redemption in terms of relationship lays the ground for a *relational ethic* which claims that relationships are essential to any society and that the *quality of human life is ultimately to be measured by the quality of our relationships*.

But then, unlike CST, RT develops a much more detailed understanding of personal relationships. In 1993, Michael Schluter and David Lee sought to find a way to transform their previous findings into an instrument to assess public policies. They developed the incipient element of the framework that would become a familiar feature of the RT literature. This framework both proposes an understanding of relational proximity and serves as an assessment tool for relationships (both normative and analytical).

RT's aims are to propose solutions to the problems of contemporary society; to be able to come up with an agenda for reform.

Five key features are considered: 1. *The Quality of communication* (directness); 2. *The frequency, regularity and amount of contact and length of relationship* (continuity); 3. *The variety of contexts of meeting* (multiplexity); 4. *Mutual respect and fairness in the relationship* (parity); 5. *Shared goals, values and experience* (commonality).

Unlike CST, RT has a very strong pull towards action. It aims to be operational and see public action as the place where convictions and intellectual framework must be verified. RT's aims are to propose solutions to the problems of contemporary society; to be able to come up with an agenda for reform. This pull toward action is required to transform the biblical framework into something that could reach the level of concrete policies. Hence the need for

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and the foreigner.

an alternative benchmark - both qualitative and quantitative - that could be leveraged to measure the impact of government policies. Relational proximity was to serve as a contrasting normative element to individual utility, economic efficiency or the different

claims of equality. The quality of government action should also – but not exclusively – take into account the quality of the relationships it furthers or creates.

The full importance of this claim needs to be rightly understood. The usual benchmarks to measure the success of public policies are 1. *Individual utility* (guarantee of rights, improved material conditions, access to social goods, enhanced freedoms, increased well-being, etc.); 2. *Economic efficiency* (efficient use of public resources; sustainable social investment; institutional coherency, etc.); 3. *Improved fairness and equality* (equality of rights and opportunities; non-discrimination; positive discrimination, etc.). RT adds to these criteria another one. It claims that of equal or even higher importance is the quality of relationship created by public action. For bad policies on that account not only hurt individuals but undermine the coherence and stability of the social link itself.⁴

Reason, pluralism and participation in the public square

Reaching the end of an encyclical, the average reader usually asks himself: ‘well – excellent – but what about action? How can this translate into politics?’ No amount of re-reading will dig up any specific ‘Catholic-Political-Agenda’. Indeed, the Magisterium carefully stops short of promoting specific policies or singling out a political party as being the ‘right one’. This is first due to the separation between Church and State and second out of respect for the legitimate diversity of opinions among Catholics regarding political priorities. This obviously has not always been the case, but since Vatican II, the position of the Church is very clear on the issue. The legitimate autonomy of political affairs – albeit implicitly recognized since *Rerum novarum* (1891) – is duly acknowledged in *Dignitatis humanae* (1965) and *Gaudium et Spes* (1965). Differences of opinions over politics among Catholics are said to be natural and to the benefit of democracy (*Centesimus annus*, 1991). Consequently CST – by making sense of the present world affairs in the light of Revelation – has to be understood as a framework for action. But one that stops short of commanding any specific public action. In that sense, CST principles are

hermeneutical principles that point toward action but do not command a set of specific policies. This distinction might seem dodgy. Does it not reduce CST to an innocuous discourse? That is, a self-defeating religious illusion that asks for action but retreats from action at the same time?

CST argues that the legitimacy of its discourse derives from two sources (*Fides et ratio*, 1998). The first is Revelation and matters for believers. The second is reason and experience and should matter to all. The public square is built on language and reason, argues the Church. By adopting the use of natural reason the Church's reading of social realities is accessible to 'all people of good will'. This does not hide the religious source of this reading. It simply asks for its relevance to be judged on its coherence and usefulness to understand politics. Religion-based discourses are not unfathomable. Expressed in logical, rational terms they may be understood by all. As any other actor on the public stage, the Catholic Church then takes part in the public debate. The authority of its discourse however should be judged on the quality of its arguments and the coherence of its discourse.

Moreover, CST feels compelled to enter the public square. As said before, there is an intimate link between the inner, personal relationship to God and social relationships. In Matthew 25, Christ identifies himself with the poor, the prisoner and the foreigner. Christian salvation is not a private reality occurring in the solitude of the inner-self. Charity requires justice and Justice would decay without charity (*Caritas in veritate*, 2009). The Catholic Church is compelled by its faith to a preferential option for the poor (*Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 1987). And as such, it has a duty to participate in the public square – respecting its plurality and secularity.

Relational Thinking also acknowledges the difficulty of entering the public square from a religiously motivated perspective. Several obstacles are identified: 1) the hermeneutic of biblical texts; 2) the normative authority of biblical texts in a pluralistic society; 3) The tension between principles and policies.

The plurality of texts requires a hermeneutical approach that will give a reasoned account of the main principles underpinning it. Historical developments and cultural changes must be taken into account as part of the interpretative process. The reader himself only reaches for the texts from a specific place in time and history. Reasoned principles are therefore not to be

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On the question of the possibility to argue with a non-believer on the basis of religious principles, RT puts forward their exemplarity. Recognition of their religious authority is not needed for them to be part of the public discussion. Their *exemplarity* is sufficient to inspire policies on the basis of their ability to frame specific actions. As reasoned principles they are by nature accessible to all – believers as well as non-believers. There is obviously no question of imposing these principles on the latter, rather to discuss and eventually agree on them.⁵

On the last point RT as well as CST are careful to distinguish principles from specific policies. The first are ethical statements whilst policies are a means to achieve a specific goal. Between the two lies the whole difference between atemporal norms and concrete historical settings, between conviction ethics and responsibility ethics. Specific actions are always complex. There are many possible ways to achieve the same goal and different priorities can be set among competing normative claims. RT therefore advocates a necessity to engage in the political field but calls for prudence when identifying a specific policy as being ‘Christian’.

John Ascroft summarizes the position in the following paragraph:

‘We use the term “principle” here to refer not to a formal legal rule, but to the summary constructs which are our attempt to capture key aspects of biblical teaching, from many parts of the text, in a way that can be brought to bear on contemporary issues. They can be seen as a bridge with one footing fixed in Scripture but constructed differently in order to reach different points on the shifting sands of our contemporary context. As an aid, principles serve to remind us of the key values and guide us in their application rather than to prescribe courses of action directly (...). It is vitally important to distinguish principles from policies. A key distinction is that principles are ethical statements whilst policies are the means of achieving those goals. Christians should be willing to propose and campaign for specific policies as part of their social and political engagement, recognizing that disagreement is legitimate. The church, however, should be cautious in committing itself to policies which merely reflect the art of the possible – economically, politically and socially. (...).’⁶

As this quotation shows CST and RT have - if not identical - at least very similar approaches to politics. However, two important elements set them

apart. The first is the role played by *natural reason* and the notion of the *common good* in CST. The second is the emphasis put by RT on *action* and on *experience*. The Catholic Church trusts reason to be capable to unite people in a shared and common search for truth. The public square is the place ruled by reason where people find agreement out of their common commitment to search for the truth. But the search for truth is not the aim of politics, but a means to it. It has an instrumental value (*Fides et ratio*, 1998). Human polity aims at the common good, that is, the firm hope and belief that the good of a person and the good of its community ultimately stand in conjunction. There may be a permanent tension between the two, but they are meant to converge and will eschatologically be united. Christians must therefore engage in politics not just out of their concern for the poor, but out of their commitment to the common good. Searching for the public good is an essential part of the search for their own good. Public reason is the way to engage in this common search. Therefore if deep dissensions and strong disagreements are a natural part of the common good dynamic, they should not be confounded with the natural state of a human community (an unavoidable conflict of interest). Disagreements and dissensions can be and will be ultimately resolved. There is always a way forward toward the common good. Thus Christians, for all the setbacks, must constantly and peacefully engage in politics, in search of the common good.

Christian faith is incarnate and must show coherence between convictions and actions.

Relational Thinking on its side insists on action and the value of experience. Between convictions and actions there must be a continuity. The stated aim is from the beginning not so much to read the 'signs of the time' and propose a meta-discourse on politics but to engage in politics, to propose reform and to be able to achieve concrete results. The emphasis on action is adamant. Christian faith is incarnate and must show coherence between convictions and actions. The great intuition of RT is then to see the quality of relationships as a standard and a metric, which articulates *Christian convictions* (God's love is the ultimate normativity of human life) and *political action* (a good society can be apprehended through the quality of relationships it builds between its members). The relational lens provides an alternative vision of society on which we can act.

Yet this very insistence on the necessity of action also leads RT to value experience. We must learn from experience. RT is no top-down, rigid Christian view of politics. It stems as much from experience as from Christian

convictions. Practice and experience of community life, economic transactions, policy making and political struggles are as important as the core Christian values that inspire them. Experience shapes a crucial understanding of how to translate Christian values into efficient and coherent policies. Action is learned through experience. Thus RT acknowledges a full hermeneutical cycle: 'Our own experience has been that the interpretative cycle of text-paradigm-principle-policy can work in any order and any direction, enabling continual revision of provisional understandings.'⁷ This capacity to learn from experience and improve the conceptual framework of the relational lens sets apart RT from CST.

3 Mutual enrichment

A compare and contrast approach to CST and RT is of little help if it stops there and does not search for mutual enrichment. In this last section we will explore how one approach could benefit from elements taken from the other. Yet this positive move implicitly builds on a negative one. To search for mutual enrichment is to have a fair idea of at least some of the shortcomings of each approach. Thus we begin this section with some critical notes. We then move on to possible mutual enrichment.

Some of the limits

Catholic Social Thought and the 'ivory tower syndrome'; Relational Thinking and the 'one-size-fits-all' relational lens.

CST is the voice of a magisterium. It is a discourse spoken out from the safe distance of the doorway to transcendence. Bishops or popes don't engage in politics any more. The recognition of the difference between religious power and political power and the recognition of the autonomy of politics is now a given fact of Catholicism. This is right and was long overdue.

But there is a side effect: the distance of non-engaged players from those on whom they are commenting. The same syndrome affects academics. The self-imposed distance between the magisterium and world affairs is one that

affects CST. As a ‘teaching’ from an authority that refrains from entering the world and therefore retreats from the world, it leaves to ‘others’, namely to the famous ‘people of good will’, the task of acting according to its teaching. ‘Others’ must engage politics, ‘others’ must deal with the ambiguity of the world and ‘others’ will have to cope with hard political decisions. This distance explains the often *irenic* and mildly *ingenuous* stance of CST toward politics and governance in particular; this distance also explains the lack of practical thinking that could lead toward action and concrete policies. Lay people may be involved in the redaction of social encyclicals, but the point of view, however, always remains that of the magisterium. The ivory tower syndrome is one that haunts CST and limits its operability.

Too much prudence sometimes leads to irrelevance. For centuries popes were and acted as the head of a temporal power, excommunicating enemies, engaging wars to preserve their domains and opposing the pretensions of the incipient sovereign states. The Catholic Church has since then thoroughly revised its position and renounced political power. So much so that the magisterium doesn’t engage any more in any national political body and reduces its direct political action to CST: a position reflected in its status at the United Nations as Permanent *Observer* (not an *agent*). Indeed, this is the well-known weakness of CST. The corpus might be interesting and coherent, but it is widely ignored by politicians and economists. Even within the Catholic Church, few people – mainly theologians – read the social encyclicals. Practical irrelevance is actually the main challenge that CST has to face.

The ivory tower syndrome is one that haunts CST and limits its operability.

One of the limits of RT comes from its strength. By making relationships the main focus of its approach, it may also be asking too much from one single concept. First and foremost not all relationships are good relationships. The relational lens⁸ could easily overlook cases of institutional abuse or pathological relationships. Take the case of alcoholism. Most regular consumption takes place at home and usually takes a heavy price on family relationships. Would an alcoholic father or mother be picked up by the five standard benchmarks of RT? It might appear as a lack of *directness* (capability to engage the other), or failure of *parity* (lack of fairness and respect in the relationship) or even an incapacity to achieve *continuity* (length and duration of the relationships). But most alcoholic parents do love their children, claim that they respect them and are in a long term relationship with them (how can they cease to be their parents?).

Indeed, the relational lens in its effort to adapt to a secular society has dropped its reference to the end goal of relationships recognised by the Christian Revelation, namely love (*agape*). The qualitative dimensions making up the standard benchmark of RT are *fairness*, *dignity* and *sustainability*, none of which can stand as the goal of relationships. You don't engage in a relationship to achieve dignity, sustainability or fairness. These values are instrumental. They are needed for a relationship to exist and thus are important to it. But they nonetheless remain only 'means-to-an-end-values', not the goal.

And here is the problem. You can't drop the aims *without losing what makes the internal dynamics of relationships*. Drop love and you lose the ability to understand why some relationships are so much more important than others;

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why some relationships are essential to human flourishing while others are superficial. How can love – and then not any love but *agape* in the RT founding texts – be the end goal of relationships? Is it possible to objectively assess the *quality* of a relationship without taking into account the dynamic of wider relationships towards their own achievement?

And then, is there only one aim, *agape*? What about the other human forms of love? Which are the dynamic relationships between those human loves and God's love?

Another related limit of the RT framework is that all kinds of different relationships are revised through the same lens, as if there was no difference between family ties, economic contracts and a shared language. The incredible diversity of relationships is reduced by the lens to a 'one-standard-fits-all'. Not that this is the claim of the RT approach. It recognises the diversity of relationships and the heterogeneity of contexts. That is why the interpretation of what is seen through the lens is of such importance. But nonetheless, one and the same lens is used to measure relational proximity in all sorts of contexts and relationships. Again, we find here the same question as before. To deal with the real diversity and heterogeneity of relationships, you need to have a fairly good understanding of their internal dynamic towards the same end.

The following two sections aim to engage these limits.

The dynamic of the common good

The roots of the notion go back to antiquity, but the common good tree really grew up during the Middle Ages and came to flourish during the Renaissance⁹. It is a concept inherited from Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics* and partly taken over from the Roman legal notion of *utilitas communis*. Its elaboration to a fully-fledged concept, however, was to be the work of scholastic thinkers. With stunning audacity they interpreted the concept in Christological terms and from there, brought it back to metaphysics, ethics and politics. By then, the specific content of the common good also became hotly debated and served, for example during the Italian Renaissance, to justify republics and monarchies alike. The dawn of Modernity saw then many of its key features becoming secularised: the hope of the common good became our faith in 'progress', the content of the common good was pinned down to mean 'general interest', the eschatological subject in whom the common good would be ultimately achieved was said to be the 'sovereign, national state'. Oblivious to this mutation of meanings, the Catholic Church still refers to the common good as if everybody would understand and agree on the notion. This is not the case anymore. Few people understand the concept and fewer still know its history. However, after almost vanishing in the second part of the twentieth century, politicians, lawyers and philosophers are rediscovering the importance of this tradition, especially as a critical instrument that helps explain the shortcomings of political liberalism.¹⁰

So what does the Catholic Church understand when referring to the common good? To put it in a simple way, *the common good is a hope, the hope of a real and possible conjunction between the good of a person and that of its community*. This hope directly contradicts what Cavanaugh has termed the 'ontology of violence' that spurs Modernity¹¹. In the view of the Catholic Church, there is no such thing as a bitter and unending conflict of individual interests at the root of societies. On the contrary, there is a hope that these conflicts are not meant to endure for ever and can be resolved *because the good of each of us and the good of our communities are not antithetical*. They will ultimately converge.

The core of the concept is theological. It is in Christ that the good of each and all persons coincide, that is, in the person of the risen Lord as it will be revealed eschatologically at the end of time. Several key features of this

The common good is a hope, the hope of a real and possible conjunction between the good of a person and that of its community.

concept develop from here: a) *universal eschatological reach*, b) *historical incompleteness*, c) *conflictive and dialogical nature*, d) *kenotic dynamic (dialectic)*.

a) **Universal eschatological reach**

The first refers to the size of the community envisioned by the Church. The good of each person must encompass the good of all people – that means all humankind. The search for the common good won't be complete before it is enlarged well over the borders of limited national or cultural communities to reach all human people. This universal enlargement is the horizon of the common good. It is however a *real hope*, not a utopia. Eschatology is no fairy-tale. It is the real point towards which time and history flow. Thus the hope for the common good is anchored into a metaphysical belief: violence, greed and injustice won't last forever; but peace, justice and love will.

b) **Historical incompleteness**

The second is but the corollary of the first. If the full common good is eschatological in nature, we should not expect it to be realized in any specific historical community. Any historical common good, for all its achievements is incomplete. The very borders of the community enjoying the common good will progressively generate tensions, because it excludes others from it. Thus

It is however a real hope,
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the very dynamic of the *universal common good* will slowly erode borders and put them into question. This is vividly illustrated today by the pressure put on national borders by migration or by transnational corporations

on national tax law. The point is that this *incompleteness* is normal and unavoidable while human history has not reached its close. Yet this is not an excuse to forgo the search for the universal common good. On the contrary. We must tend to realize the full common good knowing that we won't ever totally achieve it. CST thus differentiates between the eschatological common good (Christ's Person and Christ's Kingdom) and the many specific, historical common goods that may be achieved.

c) **Conflictive and dialogical nature**

The multiplicity of the different historical common goods that can be achieved, the many different *means* existing to achieve them and the *priority order* in their consecution explain the conflictive and dialogical nature of the search for the common good. This is why politics is said to have one unique aim: the common good. But the recognition of this aim is not here to quell the

conflictive and difficult nature of this search. Hope unites us, but the practical setting of the common good's requirement may be fracturing. Indeed, to search and work for the common good is more often than not a question of breaking down entrenched privileges or opposing reductive views of a common good limited to one's constituency, a party or the 'grand national interest'. The creation of political power itself is one of the first and more basic common goods. Yet the conflictive search for the common good always lies under the normativity of the eschatological common good. This is why CST insists on the will to dialogue with others and confront peacefully the conflicting views of what the common good requires from us.

d) The kenotic dynamic of the common good

Hegel's dialectic is inspired by the kenotic nature of the dynamic of the common good. In simple terms, in many social contexts, not even the most basic requirements of the common good can be met. The will to work for the common good may be so efficiently opposed that to even hope for it seems foolish and unrealistic. Self-interest, disillusion and cynicism – the realistic approach to politics – are the three attitudes most efficiently opposing the search for the common good. In private, despair turns to entrenched egoism; in public, it transforms politics into a power play without any other purpose than personal privilege (Machiavelli). The Catholic Church never despairs of the search for the common good. But it recognises that the search is frequently kenotic. We will seemingly work for nothing and our best effort doesn't reach the outcome we had hoped for. But precisely then, this engagement, this work will bear fruit in due time, precisely because the dynamic of the common good is ultimately that of God's Spirit in the world. The death and resurrection of Christ are at the root of our hope for the common good to be realistic and feasible. We should therefore expect similar difficulties as those of our Master when engaging for the common good. This is why *humility* is directly bound by CST to *governance and politics*. We are part of a dynamic that is greater than us and that we don't master or fully understand. *Humble* service is therefore the attitude corresponding to the work for the common good.

But what about the specific content of the common good? To medieval scholars, the common good was not only a goal but set very specific requirements on rulers. It was a norm of politics as much as an end. Yet if norms partly derive from the end, the concrete requirement of the common good is a matter of local discernment. Much depends on the decision to recognize one or another good or value as being part of the common good. With typical refinement scholastic thinkers made distinctions between the *sources* and

forms of normativity associated with the common good (between internal and external sources of normativity - *ordo duplex* - and between material and formal elements of normativity).

CST inherited these distinctions but chose to summarize what is required by the common good as material goods, institutions and social virtues: (a) *material goods allowing survival and well-being* (i.e. the material conditions set for seeking the common good); (b) *institutionalized reciprocity of dignity, meaning institutions organizing our living-together as one of human beings* (i.e. the formal conditions set for the research of the common good); (c) *social virtues, that is the social enactment of the common good* (i.e. the ethical condition of the common good). Now as the common good is a social dynamic, there is not a closed list of goods making up the normative content of the common good. Each society must constantly ask itself what is *now, in our community, under the present circumstances*, required by the common good. Thus the question of the common good is also the permanent and constant question of politics.

Yet as the question is not new to societies, CST holds some elements to be of crucial importance. First among the common goods that must be ensured are the *material base* of survival (peace, stability, food and water, housing, basic public infrastructures, etc.), then some of the key *institutions achieving important common goods* like security, justice; solidarity; political participation; etc. But material goods or institutions aren't enough. The best goods or institutions can be perverted if not used according to the common good. A set of *shared practices* are required for the public square to exist and function *for* the common good. Indeed, the common good is first and foremost a set of common values and social virtues that are as much the *result* as the *ethical condition* of the common good. Different lists of social virtues exist, but justice, peace, solidarity, perseverance, concord, strength, prudence, charity and brotherhood are often mentioned by CST. These are the social practices needed by social institutions to work well and achieve their contributions to the common good. For CST it is the *quality of our common values and social practices* that we use to measure the quality of the common good achieved by a society.¹²

Now, is that not what RT tries to measure? Does the quality of our relationships not directly ensure the quality of our common values and social practices? For all its refinements, CST's understanding of the common good's normativity singularly lacks the capacity to concretely assess the quality of the common good achieved by a society. This is something RT does.

Looking at the common good through the relational lens

Institutions shape relations. And good relations are necessary to have functioning institutions. These are two basic tenets of RT. Now, we could also assume that the quality of relationships generated by an institution may indeed be an indicator of the level of common good achieved by this institution. This idea seems pretty straightforward. Institutions, especially public institutions, are generally set in the hope of producing a specific social good (mobility for roads, education for state schools, health for the NHS, etc.). To that aim, a complex net of reciprocal relationships is organized. Through them cooperation among many individuals is achieved in order to produce the desired social good. The quality of relationships depends then on the *quality of the organization* as well as the *quality of the produced social good*. Hence the level of common good achieved by an institution can rightly be measured by the quality of the relationships it creates. The quality of relationships is probably one of the best indicators for the assessment of the level of common good achieved in a community or a society.

The quality of relationships depends then on the quality of the organization as well as the quality of the produced social good.

CST would gain a lot by adding a relational lens to its concept of the common good. Not only would it enhance its ability to assess specific policies and institutions, but it would also give it a crucial tool it so needs to become operational. The relational lens bridges the gap existing between an innocuous discourse on the common good and an effectively sharp capacity to propose concrete policies for the common good. It could be usefully added to its understanding of labour-capital relationships, to the tensions existing between private property and the creation of public goods, or to its analysis of poverty or even financial crisis. Certainly this is a theme that would benefit from further exploration.

But then RT could also gain from CST's understanding of the common good dynamic. Not all relations are equally important. Some matter more than others. Some are of more value than others. How could we tell apart the ones that are more essential from the ones that are of lesser importance? The common good understands social relationships as a dynamic, a dialectic emergence of an ever greater common good. As such it brings back to RT the notion of the ultimate end of all social relations. Such hope for the common good allows us to recognize non-absolute hierarchies of importance among

the many specific common goods that may be achieved by institutions or policies. It is a question of priority among the specific common goods, but one based on a qualitative difference. Some common goods are more essential to our humanity than others and should therefore be prioritized. These orders of priority could serve to differentiate - among the multiplicity of relationships - the ones that are of major importance and should receive special attention. But even without ordering, the mere fact that relationships ought to develop along the dynamic of the common good already brings a possible refinement to the notions of *continuity* and that of *commonality*.

The common good perspective may also help RT deal with the *multiplicity* of relationships. The diversity of specific, historical common goods is unified by their belonging to the same dynamic that leads them to the ultimate and eschatological common good. Thus their diversity can be fully recognized without renouncing the unity of their belonging to one and the same normativity. The different specific common goods build upon different values and social virtues. They therefore also tend to generate different kinds of relationships. For example universal education does not build upon the same social virtues as peace and security. Adopting the dynamic of the common good as a framework, the relational lens could both

recognize the radical multiplicity of relational contexts but still be capable of putting them under one and the same overarching normativity. The one-size-fits-all difficulty may be - if not solved - at least mitigated.

Last but not least, the common good framework could help RT understand the management of power within relationships. *The Relational Lens* book explores in detail how much this is a complex question. There is no relationship without power plays among them. Neither the top-down, hierarchical approach nor the egalitarian approach are deemed suitable. But through the many examples given there doesn't seem to be a general answer on how to handle power in order not only to preserve relationships, but actually to allow them to flourish. Relational governance might actually be what CST understands when speaking about governance for the common good.

Some common goods are more essential to our humanity than others and should therefore be prioritized.

Conclusion

This article can only be but the beginning of a larger investigation. It closes with the conviction of the richness of both approaches and all that could be gained by bridging them more closely. Both approaches share the same Christian and Biblical background. Even if they are different in kind and scope, they remain none the less deeply correlated. The longer historical time span of CST is matched by the greater will and ability to reach action of RT. Both approaches may gain from each other.

More specifically, I have tried to propose here – in a rather unilateral way – how this mutual enrichment could work. Clearly the notion of the common good could be of interest to RT and help improve relational analysis. And on the other hand, RT could be of great use to CST in order to assess the quality of the common good generated by specific policies and institutions. However the task is still wide open and should be researched much more thoroughly than we were able to do here.

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Catholic Social Teaching and Relational Thinking

A response to Mathias Nebel
and Paul Dembinski

**Guy Brandon and
Michael Schluter**

The Jubilee Centre is grateful to Mathias Nebel and Paul Dembinski for taking on the task of studying Relational Thinking both in its Christian and ‘secular’ expression and providing a critique from the perspective of Catholic Social Teaching with particular reference to ‘the common good’. Mathias Nebel exemplified in his discussions on earlier drafts of the paper values which underpin Relational Thinking – always courteous, attentive to the other point of view, looking for the positive and seeking clarity. The response set out in the sections below we hope will be treated in that same spirit of a desire for mutual understanding and deeper fellowship, for we all seek to serve the same Father through the Lord Jesus Christ. These responses to Mathias Nebel’s paper are intended to stimulate further discussion, greater clarity and a deeper understanding of how we may best serve one another in the pursuit of our shared commitment to the gospel of Christ.

1 A history of Christian Social and Relational Thought

In exploring the similarities and differences between Catholic Social Teaching (CST) and Relational Thinking (RT) it is helpful to understand the background to each. It is worth noting in particular that RT is a movement, rather than an idea or interpretative tradition.

CST has its origins in papal encyclicals, and although the authorship is broader than this (including Bishops' Letters, for example), it is primarily a collection of official documents of the Catholic Church, delivered to the community.¹³

RT, in contrast, is multipolar.¹⁴ It is Covenantal, and a grassroots and predominantly lay movement that seeks to communicate with its audience through a wide variety of means, without (necessarily) the direct involvement of Church authorities. Although there is a clear group of people who have started this movement, they do not express ownership of RT in the way CST is delivered by the Catholic Church. Moreover, the intention is precisely that RT *should* be taken up and developed further by a wide range of people and organisations, though ideally remaining true to its Judeo-Christian roots. Thus, whilst there are extensive similarities between RT and CST, the distinctions perhaps flow from differences in sources of authority between Protestantism and Catholicism discussed in section 2.

Although the corpus of texts that constitutes the body of CST begins with Pope John XXIII's 1891 encyclical *Rerum novarum*, the tradition of interpretation dates back at least to the scholastics of the middle ages. Similarly, although RT is articulated in a number of books and articles since the 1970s,¹⁵ it draws on church tradition back to the early Church Fathers and trends in Protestant thought as it emerged in the 16th and 17th centuries. Another difference is therefore simply the respective amounts of time they have existed. Although both have roots in earlier thinking and ultimately the Bible, their formal beginnings are relatively clear. CST has had an additional 80 years or more to develop its key themes and gain traction.

Although RT is articulated in a number of books and articles since the 1970s, it draws on church tradition back to the early Church Fathers.

The major issue addressed by RT is the neglect of relationships in the Protestant Tradition. Broadly, the Reformation emphasised the individual's response to God. CST emphasises the collective outcome; whilst the idea of Personalism in CST focuses on the *relationships* of the individual, the *individual* remains paramount. Personalism has little to say about group or organisational relationships. In the Protestant Tradition, there is a stress on the role of the local church within a hierarchy of Church bodies. However, the focus on relationships is not central either to CST or the Protestant Tradition.¹⁶

2 The role of epistemology

CST builds on the tradition of the Church. It can be traced back to the principle of 'Love your neighbour'. This is then applied, using reason, to a wide range of issues that confront society at the time the Church speaks. A number of derivative principles are identified but CST does not investigate scriptural Revelation in detail to derive these principles. There is no unifying underlying paradigm in CST: it is intended to be accepted as a tradition of interpretation rather than a systematic body of thought.

RT, theologically, rests on biblical law as a category that is distinct from the Kingdom of God.

Theologically, CST rests on the Kingdom of God and its forward momentum towards the time of Christ's return, when evil will be thrown out of the world: 'all human progress towards the eschatological Common Good is actually our human participation in the progressive emergence of God's Kingdom.'¹⁷

RT, theologically, rests on biblical law as a category that is distinct from the Kingdom of God.¹⁸ Biblical law assumes the hardness of the human heart (cf. Matthew 19:8, and bear in mind that most Israelites of the Exodus generation died in the wilderness and never reached the Promised Land).

Biblical law provides a normative paradigm.¹⁹ Jesus appeals to the law as a normative basis for decisions (e.g. Mark 7:9-13). Biblical law's interest in Righteousness and Shalom is carried through into Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom of God. There is therefore continuity between the ways of the Lord as represented by the law in the Old Testament and the ways of the Lord

as described in the Kingdom of God. Jesus also appeals to underlying principles to use when applying biblical law within a different context (e.g. Mark 3:1-6).

A great deal of effort has been devoted by the Jubilee Centre – which is tasked with ensuring RT remains true to the Judeo-Christian tradition – to developing the methodology for deriving principles from the text, and testing their legitimacy. In particular, there is also the issue of how we deal with changing culture and apply biblical principles to constantly changing social mores – for example on issues such as slavery, homosexuality, and the role of women. Nebel argues that ‘The plurality of texts requires a hermeneutical approach that will give a reasoned account of the main principles underpinning it. Historical developments and cultural changes must be taken into account as part of the interpretative process. The reader only reaches for the texts from a specific place in time and history. Reasoned principles are therefore not to be equated with Revelation itself, but as its reasoned, formalized understanding.’ However, our framework must also be grounded somewhere in order to ensure we are not just giving our culture the answer it wants to hear. In Mark 7:9-13 Jesus warns against avoiding the ethical thrust of biblical law, in this case by keeping the letter but not the spirit of the Law.

Lastly, there is the issue of the interconnectedness of society and the way that biblical law takes this into account. It is impossible to adjust one element of public policy (e.g. interest rates) without impacting not only the intended variable but also many other aspects of society and the economy (for example, inflation, economic growth and employment but also borrowing, house prices, welfare spending, even family breakdown). Biblical law articulates a holistic system in which the different strands of society and the economy pull in the same direction with the same overarching goals, largely avoiding such unintended consequences. It is biblical law as a whole that acts as a relational paradigm rather than simply each law in isolation, being relational in its intention and consequences. These issues are explored further in *The Jubilee Roadmap*.

It is biblical law as a whole that acts as a relational paradigm rather than simply each law in isolation, being relational in its intention and consequences.

3 Distinction of principles and policies

There is agreement between CST and RT about the distinction between principle and policy. RT as well as CST is careful to distinguish principles from specific policies. The first are ethical statements whilst policies are a means to achieve a specific goal. Between the two lies the whole difference between a-temporal norms and concrete historical settings, between conviction ethics and responsibility ethics. Specific actions are always complex. There are many possible ways to achieve the same goal and different priorities can be set among competing normative claims. RT therefore advocates a necessity to engage in the political field but calls for prudence when identifying a specific policy as being “Christian”.²¹

Nebel quotes the following position on RT’s approach to principle and policy from John Ascroft:

‘We use the term ‘principle’ here to refer not to a formal legal rule, but to the summary constructs which are our attempt to capture key aspects of biblical teaching, from many parts of the text, in a way that can be brought to bear on contemporary issues. They can be seen as a bridge with one footing fixed in Scripture but constructed differently in order to reach different points on the shifting sands of our contemporary context. As an aid, principles serve to remind us of the key values and guide us in their application rather than to prescribe courses of action directly (...). It is vitally important to distinguish principles from policies. A key distinction is that principles are ethical statements whilst policies are the means of achieving those goals.

A key distinction is that principles are ethical statements whilst policies are the means of achieving those goals.

Christians should be willing to propose and campaign for specific policies as part of their social and political engagement, recognizing that disagreement is legitimate. The church, however, should be cautious in committing itself to policies which merely reflect the art of the possible – economically, politically and socially. (...).²²

Nebel suggests that CST stresses reason and the Common Good, whilst RT stresses action and experience.²³ Whilst RT does seek action, it also stresses the legitimacy of Christians differing in what they consider to be ‘right’ in a given situation, given the complexity of calculating

the relational impact, the timeframe of the impact (long-term vs. short term), and so on. Also, both principles and policies lie on a 'ladder of abstraction' that stretches from the broad to the more specific.²⁴ The more general principles are a check on the more specific ones, but need to be applied in specific situations. For example, in Mark 3:1-6 Jesus applies the broad 'Do good' principle to the specific situation of discerning whether it is legitimate to heal on the Sabbath.

4 How Catholic Social Teaching and Relational Thinking understand relationships

Catholic Social Teaching stresses the heterogeneity of relationships,²⁵ as does Personalism, which distinguishes personal (e.g. family) relationships from functional relationships.²⁶ CST also uses the concept of 'institutional mediation'. 'The issue is that a generic idea of relationship might miss the structurally specific kinds of relationship that exist (or should exist) in marriage, family, school, hospital, trades union, etc... how is "relational proximity" or "fairness" different in families and universities, for example?'²⁷

RT, by contrast, stresses that the same categories apply to all relationships – namely relational proximity/distance and the five dimensions of relational proximity: Directness, Continuity, Multiplexity, Parity and Commonality. These are drawn from an analysis of biblical texts.²⁸

RT addresses relationships of all kinds – between individuals, but also between and within families, nations, ethnic groups, and organisations (e.g. stakeholders in a company). RT also enables discussion of the significance of these relationships based on biblical teaching. Deuteronomy 24:5, for example, shows that the state does not have an unlimited or unqualified claim on its citizens.

5 Underlying assumptions

There is a case for saying that RT ends up with a more radical critique of society today than CST, since it refuses to accept a series of problematic issues raised by individualism:

- The individualism inherent in the rights agenda
- Evaluation of policy from the perspective of individual utility²⁹
- The individualism assumed within the schools system
- The focus on shareholders, consumers etc. as individuals within capitalist economies
- Even the individualistic-materialistic definition of key terms like ‘poverty’ and ‘development’.

However, RT also adopts assumptions from the prevailing worldview. It takes on assumptions about the structurally-specific features of institutional relationships (schools, prisons, businesses, for example) in order to apply the concept and framework of relationships. For example, RT refers to the relationship that is appropriate between company and regulator – but the term ‘appropriate’ needs unpacking further. What is appropriate may differ from context to context; it could be defined by the perceptions of the different parties as determined by an RPF questionnaire; it could be defined externally by legislation; or for an institution like marriage it might fall back on the Relational Values of the Judeo-Christian Tradition (RVJCT). More work is needed to clarify the assumptions used by RT that are currently summarised in the word ‘appropriate’.

6 Audiences

RT seeks to influence Christian and non-Christian audiences. These may include those of other faiths such as Buddhists and Hindus, but also secularists. The explanations of RT are elaborated using science, reason, experience and intuition, whilst not hiding the fact that they are underpinned by RVJCT. People

are invited to evaluate propositions using the RT framework, unless they are among those who believe in the Judeo-Christian tradition, in which case they may also evaluate it in terms of biblical revelation.

The audience of the encyclicals (which make up the formative thinking of CST) is Catholics and ‘all people of good will’, as the encyclicals sometimes put it. *Rerum novarum* (1891) was addressed ‘To Our Venerable Brethren the Patriarchs, Primates, Archbishops, Bishops, and other ordinaries of places having Peace and Communion with the Apostolic See.’ *Humanae Vitae* (1968) was addressed ‘To his venerable brothers the patriarchs, archbishops, bishops and other local ordinaries in peace and communion with the apostolic See, to the clergy and faithful of the whole catholic world, and to all men of good will’. Whilst a range of arguments are used, does this imply a degree of sympathy with the Catholic faith is required to engage with CST?

People are invited to evaluate propositions using the RT framework, unless they are among those who believe in the Judeo-Christian tradition, in which case they may also evaluate it in terms of biblical revelation.

7 Action focus

There is an ongoing debate about the degree to which CST is focused on action. Nebel writes that ‘Unlike CST, RT has a very strong pull toward action... No amount of re-reading will dig up any specific “Catholic-Political-Agenda”... CST – by making sense of present world affairs in the light of the Bible – has to be understood as a framework for action. But it’s one that stops short of commanding any specific public action. In that sense, CST principles are hermeneutical principles that point toward action but do not command a set of specific policies.’³⁰

This point of view has been challenged, however. Jonathan Chaplin writes that an emphasis on action ‘is already present in key strands of CST, e.g. in the “see-judge-act” model developed after Vatican II. And CST documents are often in fact the outcome of years or decades of grass-roots experience. Indeed this was true of the very first one, *Rerum Novarum*, which could

not have been written without decades of parish-level diaconal activity by priests in deprived industrial areas.’ The existence of Catholic hospitals and universities and the activism around life issues shows that these encyclicals do inform and promote action. As Nebel acknowledges, ‘the corpus [of CST] can be extended well beyond these texts and includes the different written reflections and reactions as well as the practice of Catholic charities around the world.’³²

Nevertheless, RT is more explicitly and obviously intended to drive action. It has developed metrics specifically to measure change in institutions such as schools and companies, and includes the development of categories of description for relationships.³³ It is not yet clear whether RT results in normative recommendations for action in every circumstance.

8 ‘Macro-social accounts of specific relational contexts’

CST and RT in their current forms differ somewhat in their approach to macro-social trends and issues.

RT does recognise the deep asymmetries of political and economic power that exist within bureaucratic states, corporations and interest groups that threaten all human relationships. (These are addressed in books such as *The R Factor*, *Jubilee Manifesto* and *After Capitalism*.) RT uses biblical teaching on Kingship (e.g. Deuteronomy 17:14-20) as a starting point to critique undue concentrations of power, and attributes concentrations of capital to Christian neglect to observe the biblical ban on interest, the Jubilee land laws, and so on – which are all part of the Law. Some attempt has been made to spell out how these macro-relational effects impact the micro-relational on a day-to-day basis, for example in the promotion of household debt by banks and the impact this has on families in terms of divorce, domestic abuse and mental health issues. The Keep Sunday Special campaign uncovered the insight that trades unions were unable to argue for a shared day off because the level of their members’ debt was such that they wanted the extra working time at higher weekend rates of pay. Nevertheless, this is a key area that RT needs to

develop and spell out further. There is room for a greater analysis of historical issues from a relational perspective.

CST appears to have greater awareness of the macro-social and its impact on the micro-social, but its analysis is arguably less detailed given the absence of a normative underlying framework based in scriptural revelation. Thus its categories of analysis overlap more obviously with those of contemporary political and social critiques.

9 A theory of social change?

Unlike CST, RT is explicitly rooted in the paradigm of biblical law. Matthew 5:17-19 confirms the continuing validity of the Law in the Kingdom of God. However, Jesus applies the Law to thoughts as well as actions, an internalised version of the Pharisees' practice of 'building a fence around the Law' to prevent commandments from being broken. For example, not only is murder forbidden but anger, the emotion that precedes it, is also; lust similarly precedes adultery (Matthew 5:21-30). This also confirms the invalidity of abstracting principles from isolated laws and the validity of understanding the whole and using the whole as a paradigmatic framework

Broadly, the relational theory of social change will involve communicating and fostering the adoption of relational frameworks of thinking that set a relevant agenda, so that people are discussing the right issues in the right way; and then encouraging formal and informal communities to apply these biblical/relational principles within and between themselves, at every level.

Because biblical law speaks to all the different spheres of society, RT aims to influence many different institutions to achieve social change.

Suggestions for practical application are made at the level of state, individual and civil society – institutions from churches and NGOs to businesses and their many stakeholders (customers, suppliers, employees, local communities, and so on). Also, change is sought at different 'levels' in any sector, including:

Because biblical law speaks to all the different spheres of society, RT aims to influence many different institutions to achieve social change.

- Legislation
- Ethos/administrative rules/culture
- Working practices
- Personal transformation

10 The role of the Church

‘CST is the voice of a magisterium. It is a discourse spoken out from the safe distance of the doorway to transcendence. Bishops or popes don’t engage in politics any more. The recognition of the difference between religious power and political power and the recognition of the autonomy of politics is now a given fact of Catholicism. This is right and was long overdue.’³⁴ There is thus a conscious distancing of the ‘Magisterium’ from the world’s affairs; practical application of CST is left to the layperson, or ‘people of good will’.

RT has no worked-out position on the Church as an institution. This is due to its starting point (from within non-conformist Protestantism), not specific intent. So far it has only recognised that individual Christians who accept RVJCT, and often the authority of scriptural revelation, are likely to be in the vanguard of those wishing to reform the social/economic/political order with RT and that there is value in working together in community.

11 The nature of the social vision

The visions that CST and RT seek to bring about also differ. CST emphasises the Common Good, as explored in this extended quote from the encyclical *Gaudium et Spes* (1965):

‘By Common Good is to be understood “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.”³⁵ The Common Good concerns the life of all. It calls for prudence from each, and even more from those who exercise the office of authority. It consists of

three essential elements:

'First, the Common Good presupposes respect for the person as such. In the name of the common good, public authorities are bound to respect the fundamental and inalienable rights of the human person. Society should permit each of its members to fulfil his vocation. In particular, the Common Good resides in the conditions for the exercise of the natural freedoms indispensable for the development of the human vocation, such as "the right to act according to a sound norm of conscience and to safeguard... privacy, and rightful freedom also in matters of religion."³⁶

'Second, the Common Good requires the social well-being and development of the group itself. Development is the epitome of all social duties. Certainly, it is the proper function of authority to arbitrate, in the name of the common good, between various particular interests; but it should make accessible to each what is needed to lead a truly human life: food, clothing, health, work, education and culture, suitable information, the right to establish a family, and so on.³⁷

'Finally, the Common Good requires peace, that is, the stability and security of a just order. It presupposes that authority should ensure by morally acceptable means the security of society and its members. It is the basis of the right to legitimate personal and collective defense.³⁸

RT also picks up biblical law's vision of *shalom*, or social harmony, as the ultimate goal, cf. Jeremiah 29:7. 'Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.' In RT the 'relational society' is defined both negatively, in terms of the absence of injustice, conflict and relational dysfunction, as well as positively, in terms of the ends of kindness, generosity, patience, and love in action. Both RT and CST are, in effect, interested in describing and encouraging a foundational level of social good (justice, peace etc.) which can be expected between strangers and aliens. Neither intend for society to stop at that foundational level.

RT picks up biblical law's vision of *shalom*, or social harmony, as the ultimate goal.

RT seeks to make human society conform more closely with God's revealed will in terms of relationships (cf. the Lord's Prayer). God's vision is for more than comfortable strangers. Thus RT is concerned to help society

RT sees a healthy, functioning society as including not only healthy inter-personal relationships but also a healthy dynamic between all collections of relationships.

recognise and encourage fellowship and community, whether that is familial, social or collaborative (such as creative arts/worship). The collective relationships are themselves significant in God's eyes. RT sees a healthy, functioning society as including not only healthy inter-personal relationships but also a healthy dynamic between all collections of relationships.

12 The internal dynamic of CST

Although there are significant differences between CST and RT, there is substantial common ground and the possibility of close cooperation for mutual benefit.

In his paper, Nebel raises the question of the internal dynamics of different kinds of relationship:

'Indeed, the relational lens in its effort to adapt to a secular society has dropped its reference to the end goal of relationships recognised by the Christian Revelation, namely love (agape). The qualitative dimensions making up the standard benchmark of RT are fairness, dignity and sustainability. None of which can stand as the goal of relationships. You don't engage in a relationship to achieve dignity, sustainability or fairness. These values are instrumental. They are needed for a relationship to exist and thus are important to it. But they nonetheless remain only 'means-to-an-end-values', not goals.

'And here is the problem. You can't drop aims without losing what makes the internal dynamics of relationships. Drop love and you lose the ability to understand why some relationships are so much more important than others; why some relationships are essential to human flourishing while others are superficial. How can love – and then not any love but agape in the RT founding texts – be the end goal of relationships? Is it possible to objectively assess the quality of a relationship without taking into account the dynamic of wider relationships towards their own achievement? And then, is there only

*one aim, agape? What about the other human forms of love? Which are the dynamic relationships between those human loves and God's love?*³⁹

RT does not drop the idea of love (or maintain that fairness/dignity/sustainability *per se* are the goal of relationship), but asks what is the 'good' inherent in relationships: i.e. *what does love actually look like in practice?* Thus the goal is love, but that love needs nuancing in different contexts – 'love' in a marriage would look quite different to 'love' in international relations. The Relational Proximity Framework (RPF) does not suggest that its dimensions (Directness, Continuity, Multiplexity, Parity, Commonality) are the goals of relationship: they are the conditions under which relationships are most likely to thrive. Where there is Relational Proximity, there is more likely to be results such as Trust, Empathy and Understanding, Commitment, and so on.⁴⁰ Relational Proximity can bring about better knowledge of a person, but it cannot be assumed that this will lead to greater love.⁴¹

In unpacking the Common Good as the desired ends found in CST, Nebel defines it as '*a hope, the hope of a real and possible conjunction between the good of a person and that of its community*'.⁴² It has several key features, including its universal eschatological reach, historical incompleteness, conflictive and dialogical nature, and kenotic dynamic.⁴³ Nevertheless, from the perspective of RT, questions remain about the nature of the common good, which Nebel states requires 'material goods, institutions and social virtues':

'(a) material goods allowing survival and well-being (i.e. the material conditions set for seeking the common good); (b) institutionalized reciprocity of dignity, meaning institutions organizing our living-together as one of human beings (i.e. the formal conditions set for the research of the common good); (c) social virtues, that is the social enactment of the Common Good (i.e. the ethical condition of the common good). Now as the Common Good is a social dynamic, there is no closed list of goods making up the normative content of the common good. Each society must constantly ask itself what is now, in our community, under the present circumstances, required by the common good? Thus the question of the Common Good, is also the permanent and constant question of politics.'

One problem with this approach from the perspective of RT is that it risks reading in current cultural values about material prosperity. Perhaps more significantly it risks affirming the dichotomy between humans (individuals) and organisations (formal and informal groups). The very fact that agape

The very fact that agape is important means that individuals and organisations are obliged to enable and protect relationships where such agape is expressed.

is important means that individuals and organisations are obliged to enable and protect relationships where such agape is expressed. The obligation does not just go one way, from institutions to individuals: there is an obligation on individuals to enable the formal and informal groups to thrive. How this applies depends on the type of relational group. The obligations on people to help a

marriage are different from the obligations to help a village or a workplace. Nevertheless, there is common ground between RT and CST in the question of the nature of relationship we aim to achieve in different circumstances.

RT seeks an overarching biblical ethic to apply to relationships. Exodus 34:6-7 lists some of the chief characteristics of God, indicating how he treats his people – and some of the qualities we should seek to emulate. ‘Then the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet he will by no means leave [the guilty] unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.”’

Of course, ‘love’ is the most obvious overarching ethic, and this is the word that Jesus uses to summarise the Bible in Matthew 22, quoting Leviticus 19:18. The word for ‘love’ used in Leviticus 19 is *’ah^abâ*, though like the English word ‘love’ this is open to misinterpretation. In nuancing it, the word *hesed* is a useful term to understand.⁴⁴ This ‘loving-kindness’ or ‘covenant loyalty’ is a key attribute of God’s character and encompasses many of the qualities mentioned above: grace, compassion, faithfulness, love; as well as embodying or bringing about justice, righteousness and holiness. ‘Other proposals for major themes of the narrative... are all elements of *hesed*... *Hesed* is a signpost that points to the overarching biblical narrative. It could be developed further in relation to the whole canon as an ethic of the imitation of God.’⁴⁵ The Jubilee Centre argues on the basis of RVJCT that *hesed* is a rich enough yet general enough term to find application in every relationship. It references certain qualities of relationship that are always good: it is fair to say that there is no relationship between God and his Creation that does not manifest *hesed*.

Catholic Social Teaching also affirms the importance of *hesed*. The encyclical *Dives in misericordia* ('Rich in mercy', see Ephesians 2:4) explores the theme of mercy, prompted by Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount: 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy' (Matthew 5:7). However, 'mercy' is a complex and multi-faceted term with many strands to it. 'The Old Testament proclaims the mercy of the Lord by the use of many terms with related meanings; they are differentiated by their particular content, but it could be said that they all converge from different directions on one single fundamental content, to express its surpassing richness and at the same time to bring it close to man under different aspects.'⁴⁶

The encyclical holds that the English word 'Mercy' captures 'a specific and obviously anthropomorphic "psychology" of God' in the Old Testament, and encompasses many different themes but especially *rah^amîm* and *hesed*. Far from being a one-size-fits-all term, *hesed* can be applied as the goal of all relationships without losing the distinctive character of each:

'While *hesed* highlights the marks of fidelity to self and of "responsibility for one's own love" (which are in a certain sense masculine characteristics), *rah^amîm*, in its very root, denotes the love of a mother (rehem = mother's womb). From the deep and original bond – indeed the unity – that links a mother to her child there springs a particular relationship to the child, a particular love. Of this love one can say that it is completely gratuitous, not merited, and that in this aspect it constitutes an interior necessity: an exigency of the heart. It is, as it were, a "feminine" variation of the masculine fidelity to self expressed by *hesed*. Against this psychological background, *rah^amîm* generates a whole range of feelings, including goodness and tenderness, patience and understanding, that is, readiness to forgive...

This 'loving-kindness' or 'covenant loyalty' is a key attribute of God's character.

'This love, faithful and invincible thanks to the mysterious power of motherhood, is expressed in the Old Testament texts in various ways: as salvation from dangers, especially from enemies; also as forgiveness of sins - of individuals and also of the whole of Israel; and finally in readiness to fulfil the (eschatological) promise and hope, in spite of human infidelity, as we read in Hosea: "I will heal their faithlessness, I will love them freely" (Hos. 14:5).'⁴⁷

Conclusion

The Jubilee Centre is grateful to Mathias Nebel for his initial exploration of the similarities and differences between Relational Thinking (RT) and Catholic Social Teaching (CST). As Mathias Nebel articulates it, the ultimate goal of CST is for society to move towards the Kingdom of God, manifesting the Common Good – though it is not always clear what constitutes the Common Good. The ultimate goal of RT is a ‘relational society’ where personal and institutional relationships are characterised by people knowing and caring for one another. RT is a movement towards righteousness/right relationships, taking into account the reality in public life that human nature is characterised by sinfulness and hardness of heart.

The differences between CST and RT can be traced back to different starting points. CST sees the ultimate goal being pursued by the Common Good as the Kingdom of God. In contrast, RT seeks to establish the conditions under which people may better understand the categories of the gospel, such as grace, love and forgiveness. The aim of RT is to foster a framework for both public and private life that is more in tune with and sympathetic to the Christian faith without preaching it directly – since so much of its engagement takes place within the secular world. It aims to restrain evil and promote good. To summarise, *RT prepares the way for the Kingdom, whilst CST proclaims the Kingdom.*

For this reason, it is difficult to compare RT and CST directly. Rather, they should be seen as complementary. RT helps to articulate what the Common Good might look like, whilst CST helps cast a collective vision and sows the seeds of the gospel. The Jubilee Centre recognises and welcomes the potential for working together across a wide range of issues, as well as the two traditions/movements learning from each other.

Further reading

John Ashcroft, Roy Childs, Alison Myers and Michael Schluter, *The Relational Lens: Understanding, managing and measuring stakeholder relationships* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

Guy Brandon, *The Jubilee Roadmap: Finding our way in the 21st century* (Jubilee Centre, 2012).

Jonathan Burnside, *God, Justice and Society* (OUP, 2011).

Paul Mills and Michael Schluter, *After Capitalism: Rethinking Economic Relationships* (Jubilee Centre, 2012).

Jonathan Rushworth and Michael Schluter, *Transforming Capitalism from Within* (Relational Research, 2013).

Michael Schluter and John Ashcroft (eds.), *Jubilee Manifesto: a framework, agenda and strategy for Christian social reform* (IVP, 2005).

Michael Schluter and Roy Clements, 'Jubilee Institutional Norms: A Middle Way between Creation Ethics and Kingdom Ethics as the Basis for Christian Political Action' in *Evangelical Quarterly* 62:1 (1990), pp. 37-62.

Michael Schluter and David Lee, *The R Factor* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1993).

Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (IVP, 2004).

Endnotes

- 1 Schluter, M., "Relationism. A Biblical Vision of Society", Cambridge Paper, 6/4 (1997), 1-4.
- 2 The Church's texts and papal encyclical are traditionally referred to using the first couple of Latin words beginning the texts, like for example *Gaudium et spes* (1965=date of publication). All these texts can be found on www.vatican.va (2.9.2016). Short introductions to CST : Benestad, J. B., *Church, state, and society: an introduction to Catholic social doctrine*, 2011. Aquilina, M., Korson, G., Socias, J. (Ed.), *The Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church*, 2013. In 2004 the PCJP published what amount to an edited résumé of CST : Pontifical Council For Justice And Peace, *Compendium of the social doctrine of the Catholic Church*, 2004.
- 3 Cole, G., "Christianity as a relational religion", in Schluter, M., Ashcroft, J., *Jubilee Manifesto : a framework, agenda & strategy for Christian social reform*, 2005, 37-49.
- 4 Mills, P., Schluter, M., *After Capitalism: Rethinking Economic Relationships*, 2012, 74-82, 154ss.
- 5 "The nature of our engagement in social reform influences the hermeneutical task. For us it is, in part, about persuading people who do not share our faith. Thus, Scripture serves to guide and inspire what we propose to others (...) but cannot be presented as the sole justification for actions to those who do not recognize Scripture as in any way authoritative". Ashcroft, J., "The Biblical Agenda. Issues Of Interpretation". In Schluter, M., Ashcroft, J., *Jubilee Manifesto: a framework, agenda & strategy for Christian social reform*, 2005.
- 6 Ashcroft, J., "The Biblical Agenda. Issues of Interpretation", in Schluter, M., Ashcroft, J., *Jubilee Manifesto: a framework, agenda & strategy for Christian social reform*, 2005, 94.
- 7 *Ibidem*.
- 8 Ashcroft, J., Childs, R., Myers, A., Schluter, M., *The Relational Lens*, 2016.
- 9 A historical review of the concept can be found in Kempshall, M., *The common good in late medieval political thought*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999. Hibst, P., *Utilitas Publica – Gemeiner Nutz – Gemeinwohl: Untersuchungen zur Idee eines politischen Leitbegriffes von der Antike bis zum späten Mittelalter*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt, 1991. Jehne M., Lundgreen C., (Hg.), *Gemeinsinn und Gemeinwohl in der römischen Antike*, Stuttgart : F. Steiner, 2013. Villard R., *Du bien commun au mal nécessaire : tyrannies, assassinats politiques et souveraineté en Italie, vers 1470 - vers 1600*, Rome: Ecole française de Rome, 2008.
- 10 See for example Hollenbach, D., *The Common Good*, 2002 or Sluga H., *Politics and the search for the common good*, 2014.
- 11 Cavanaugh, W., *Theopolitical imagination*, T&T Clark, London, 2005.
- 12 Pope Francis' insistence on exclusion as being not a collateral damage of societies functioning otherwise well is a striking example of CST stance on this matter. Exclusion, especially the exclusion of the poor, is the symptom of a worrying breach of the common good. And as he states in *Evangelii gaudium* or *Laudato si* what needs to change is not only the institutions generating the exclusion, but also the attitudes and habitus of consumption that are part of this systemic exclusion of the poor.
- 13 Despite its top-down delivery, CST is informed by grassroots activity – see point 7: Action focus.
- 14 See Nick Spencer, 'Apolitical animal? Lessons from a biblical model', 2003, see <http://www.jubilee-centre.org/apolitical-animal-lessons-biblical-model/>. Drawing on B.G.B. Logsdon, 'Multipolarity and Covenant: Towards a Biblical Framework for Constitutional Safeguards' (unpublished Jubilee Centre paper).
- 15 Notably *Jubilee Manifesto; Old Testament Ethics for the People of God; God, Justice and Society; Transforming Capitalism from Within*.

- 16 These issues are explored further in chapter 3 of *Jubilee Manifesto*. See p. 58 for a discussion of Personalism.
- 17 Mathias Nebel, p. 10.
- 18 See Michael Schluter and Roy Clements, 'Jubilee Institutional Norms: A Middle Way between Creation Ethics and Kingdom Ethics as the Basis for Christian Political Action' in *Evangelical Quarterly* 62:1 (1990), pp. 37-62.
- 19 See Chris Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*.
- 20 See *Jubilee Manifesto*, chapter 5; 'Jubilee Institutional Norms'; *God, Justice and Society; Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*.
- 21 Nebel, p. 14.
- 22 Ashcroft, J., "The Biblical Agenda. Issues of Interpretation", in Schluter, M., Ashcroft, J., *Jubilee Manifesto: a framework, agenda & strategy for Christian social reform*, 2005, 94.
- 23 Nebel, p. 15.
- 24 See *Evangelical Quarterly* 62:1 (1990), section III: Definitions, pp. 45-46.
- 25 See Nebel, p. 10.
- 26 For the differences between Personalism and relational thinking, see Graham Cole and Michael Schluter, 'From personalism to relationism: commonalities and distinctives', January 2004. See online at <http://www.jubilee-centre.org/personalism-relationism-commonalities-distinctives-g-cole-m-schluter/>
- 27 Jonathan Chaplin, personal correspondence.
- 28 Michael Schluter gives an overview of this process in a short video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WKFfiIYVjkQ&feature=youtu.be>
- 29 See Nebel, p. 12.
- 30 P. 13.
- 31 Personal correspondence.
- 32 P. 8.
- 33 See *The Relational Lens* and Relational Analytics website, <https://www.relational-analytics.com/>.
- 34 Nebel, p. 16.
- 35 *Gaudium et Spes* 26 § 1; cf. GS 74 § 1.
- 36 GS 26 § 2.
- 37 Cf. GS 26 § 2.
- 38 See http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c2a2.htm
- 39 Nebel, p. 18.
- 40 See *The Relational Lens*, pp. 153-160.
- 41 The connection between knowing and loving is one that must be explored in greater depth elsewhere.
- 42 P. 19.
- 43 P. 21.
- 44 As *Dictionary of the Old Testament* states, 'Another Hebrew word and concept (*hesed*) may better serve as a context for Jesus' and Paul's reference to love.' (p. 227)

45 *Dictionary of the Old Testament (Pentateuch)*, p. 229.

46 *Dives in Misericordia* (1980), http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30111980_dives-in-misericordia.html

47 *Dives in Misericordia*, fn 52.

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