

# **FROM PERSONALISM TO RELATIONISM : COMMONALITIES AND DISTINCTIVES**

by Graham Cole and Michael Schluter

## **Introduction**

This paper explores the relationship between Personalist and Relationist thought in three parts. In the first part after some brief historical background, issues of definition are addressed. In Part 2 some of the main principles of Relational thought are set out . Part 3 consists of a comparison between Personalism and Relationism with special reference to how Relationism, as defined in the paper, adds value to a Personalist perspective.

## **PART ONE: PERSONALISM**

### **1. What is Personalism Historically Considered?**

It is a philosophical worldview, which was developed in the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century by thinkers in France (e.g. Jacques Maritain, Emmanuel Mounier), the U.S. (Mary Calkins, Borden Bowne, Edgar Brightman), the U.K. (John MacMurray, J H Oldham) and Germany (Martin Buber, Max Scheler). It stresses the central significance of the person in human affairs, where the person's identity is discovered and defined through their relationships. Each of these national streams had its distinctive characteristics.

Personalism was predominantly a movement encouraged by the Catholic Church and found political expression in the Christian Democratic parties, which held power in a number of European countries after WWII. It is influential today in Germany, France, the Netherlands and Poland. Its influence on public policy can be seen in issues like urban planning (small cities in Germany), the strength of trade associations and resistance to embryo research. However, Personalism has not had an answer for the Christian Democratic Parties on key issues in economic policy. As Mrs Thatcher puts it in her usual acerbic fashion, "Anything from full-bloodied enterprise on the one-hand to corporatism on the other could be dressed up in the language of Christian Democracy" (Margaret Thatcher, The Path to Power, Harper Collins, London 1995, p 346).

### **2. Some of the key characteristics of Personalism**

For this section the writers are indebted to an unpublished paper by John Cowburn S. J. entitled "A History of Personalism".<sup>1</sup> He has helpfully isolated some of the chief characteristics of Personalism as follows:

- (a) Personalists were generally not so much interested in purely speculative questions, or in seeking knowledge and understanding for their own sakes, as in the search for an understanding of how we should live.
- (b) Personalists were hostile to materialism, which in its physico-chemical form reduced human beings to elementary particles so that the person disappeared, and which in its biological form regarded human beings as just another animal species, suggesting that what matters is the

---

<sup>1</sup> Cowburn, S J John, 'The Person and Personal Acts,' Parkville: JTC, 1996 ed.

species, not the individual, that is, not the persons. Personalists believe in the soul, in spiritual realities and in the value of individual human beings.

- (c) At a time when scientists generally maintained that all events are governed by the laws of physics and are in principle predictable, Personalists maintained that the person, being partly spiritual, is not completely subject to these laws and, within certain limits, exercises free choice. Belief in free will is an essential element of Personalism, and it is often included in definitions of the person.
- (d) In the nineteenth century axiology or value-theory was established as a branch of philosophy. Later, Logical Positivists and others strongly influenced by science dismissed value-judgements as meaningless, and treated axiology with contempt. Personalists, however, used value-language and affirmed the absolute value of the person.
- (e) Virtually all Personalists have believed in a personal God. On the continent of Europe they have been mostly Catholics; in Boston mostly Methodists.

## **PART TWO: RELATIONISM**

### **3. What is Relationism?**

Relationism is a framework of social thought governing political, economic and social behaviour, which is based on the ethical values of the Jewish and Christian traditions. Its fundamental premise is that all areas of social life should be organised so as to ensure relational proximity between persons because the well-being of the individual and community is determined by the quality of personal relationships. Nine principles of Relationism have been listed as follows and below each, in italics, is a comment from the Relationships Foundation (The Relationships Foundation grew out of the work of the Jubilee Centre in 1994 and exists to strengthen relationships across private and public life – visit [www.relationshipsfoundation.org](http://www.relationshipsfoundation.org)):

**i. The key importance of the quality of relationships for personal and social well being.**

*We, the Relationships Foundation, define the goal of social involvement in terms of the well being of individuals and communities. This is seen primarily in relationship rather than materialistic terms.*

**ii. A special concern for those who are disadvantaged either relationally or materially.**

*We regard relationship deprivation to be as serious as material deprivation. The two are often inter-linked. This concern guides our choice of projects. We also seek greater recognition of the significance of relational disadvantage in public policy.*

**iii. The importance of family, as a primary foundation for the love, support and welfare of the individual.**

*Our work is based on the evidence of the benefits of stable family life for both adults and children in terms of both emotional and practical support. The extended family has a vital role in supporting marriage and the nuclear family, particularly when under pressure, and as a mediating institution between individuals and the state.*

**iv. The value of personal and family rootedness in cities, towns, neighbourhoods and villages to build strong communities.**

*Rootedness involves length of time in a locality, a sense of belonging and practical involvement. We believe rootedness is important for personal well being, access to support networks, and for the ability to participate fully in community life. In our work, therefore, we seek to maintain family and community rootedness, and support people in their efforts to build up the life of their local community.*

**v. The diffusion of political and economic power widely in society.**

*The reason for this concern is to ensure effective organisational and personal accountability and to encourage the development of community relationships.*

**vi. A commitment to justice and reconciliation at personal, corporate, regional, ethnic and racial levels as the basis for achieving peace and social harmony.**

*Peaceful and just relationships lie at the heart of our vision for society. This applies at all levels, from interpersonal relationships to international relationships. Relationships break down in many ways and are evidenced in divorce, crime, racial tensions and failed partnerships between organisations. In our work, therefore, we seek to build peace, encourage reconciliation, and address the many factors which contribute to the breakdown of relationships.*

**vii. The use of money and other resources, and the structuring of financial systems to foster healthy commercial, social and international relations.**

*Resource allocation and finance shapes relationships in many ways, through, for example, the impact of debt, resource inequality, capital flows, investment and spending patterns. We seek the use of money in ways which strengthen relationships rather than undermine them, and seek to emphasise the benefits of the careful stewardship of wealth and resources for the long-term welfare of families and communities*

**viii. The importance of governments and public and private sector organisations upholding an environment in which relationships thrive.**

*Relationships are more easily destroyed than created. They can be fostered, or undermined, by the actions of government, and public and private sector organisations. This is the basis of our concern for policy and the way in which it is implemented. We seek to evaluate the impact of our own work upon family and community relationships, and to support the creation of an environment conducive to the flourishing of relationships.*

**ix. The importance of individuals sustaining personal and social relationships and to have due regard for the relationships and welfare of other people.**

*In our work we seek to affirm individual responsibility. We believe that rights should be balanced by duties and obligations. We seek to see the impact of our actions on others and the responsibilities we hold towards them; we encourage others to do the same.*

## **PART THREE: RELATIONISM AND PERSONALISM COMPARED**

**4. Relationism has fundamentally the same understanding of reality, and the same normative values, as Personalism**

Take these three quotations below as examples from Personalist writers of the understanding of reality which would be shared by those coming from a Relationist starting point:

- (a) Mournier: “If there is one affirmation that is common to all the Personalist philosophies ... it is that the basic impulse in a world of persons is not the isolated perception of self (cogito) nor the egocentric concern for self, but the communication of consciousness ... the adult only finds himself in his relationship to others and to things, in work and comradeship, in friendship and in love, in action and encounter, and not in his relationship to himself.”
- (b) Oldham: “It is through our responses to other persons that we become persons. It is others who challenge, enlighten and enrich us. There is no such thing as the isolated individual ... Reality is the lived relation. Through sharing in the giving and receiving of mutual being the “I” becomes real. “Reality is an activity in which I share without being able to appropriate it for myself. Where there is no sharing there is no reality. Where there is appropriation by the self there is no reality ... all real life is meeting.”

- (c) Buber: “The individual is a fact of existence in so far as he steps into a living relation with other individuals. The aggregate is a fact of existence in so far as it is built up of living units of relation ... I call this sphere, which is established with the existence of man as man but which is conceptually still uncomprehended, the sphere of “between”. Though being realised in very different degrees, it is a primal category of human reality. This is where the genuine third alternative must begin.”

Because of the focus on the individual, the common ground between Relationism and Personalism is strongest around lifestyle issues. When addressing issues such as identity, meaning, security and value, both argue that these are found principally in a person’s relationships.

**5. Relationism and Personalism both share the same concerns about individualism and collectivism, and about many aspects of materialism and post-modernity.** They both reject:

- (a) The view of people and nature as just commodities (e.g. people as “labour”, “human resources” or “human capital”; or a tree as just “timber”).
- (b) The view that human beings exist primarily for the building up of efficient societies, or that the “development” of a society should be measured in terms of its economic growth.
- (c) The view that individuals can and should be self-sufficient in themselves, economically and psychologically (“the atomic self”).
- (d) The view that a person can or should have a different self across different areas of life, or the view that the self has no ultimate significance because it is only a small part of a universal self.
- (e) The view that consumer goods can be used as “tools for social disengagement” (Martin Pawsley)

**6. What are the key differences between Personalism and Relationism?**

- (a) They have different starting points, which lead them to different emphases. Personalism is primarily a response to individualism and collectivism. Relationism is primarily a response to Marxism and Capitalism. Personalism is more of a philosophical endeavour to describe what it means to be an authentically human person; Relationism is more concerned with how social life should be ordered to give maximum benefit to persons in relationship.
- (b) Most Personalists want to maintain a tight distinction between personal and public relationships (Cowburn), personal and role relationships (Anderson), personal and functional relationships (MacMurray). Anderson, for example, argues that personal relationships are reciprocal, affective, cognitive, “they focus on what each member is, rather than on tasks and responsibilities. In a personal relationship, there must be reciprocation – a mutual interest and concern for the other person. That interest and concern is an exploration of the other’s nature and resources. And a move to explore must be balanced by a willingness to disclose oneself to the other”. Such a definition, he argues, means that role or functional relationships cannot meet the requirements of a personal relationship and therefore should be excluded from a discussion of the “I-thou” relationship at the heart of Personalism. This means that Personalism has little to say about group or organisational relationships, and has difficulty addressing the concerns of public policy.

- (c) Relationists would argue that any such attempt to divide friendship and work relationships, or personal from role/functional relationships, is artificial. Almost all, or all, friendships contain an element of role or shared goals, and many work relationships contain an element of the personal. Even today a friend of mine was mourning the loss of a long-standing work colleague with as much grief as he would his closest non-work “friend”. Even church relationships are characterised by a task as well as by a belonging. At a theological level this reflects a Trinitarian as opposed to a binitarian understanding of God; any bilateral relationship is always influenced by the third actor or factor, whether that is primarily a person, a group, or a collection of factors involving many diverse actors.
- (d) There is an academic discussion about which came first – the person or the relationship. Harriet Harris, for example, argues that personhood is ontologically prior to relationship (Scottish Journal of Theology, Vol 51 (1998), Vol 2, p 214 ff). However, from a Christian perspective, the persons of the Godhead and their intra-deical relations in the Trinity have no beginning. Therefore, it is probably unhelpful to make either the person or the relationship prior to the other. However, one consequence of the term “Personalism” has been to focus attention primarily on the individual, especially in an individualistic culture. This is unhelpful if the significance of the person lies in their relationships with others.

## **7. So what does Relationism add to the Personalist understanding of Persons-in-relation?**

- (a) Relationism makes the dynamic of the relationship – whether expressed in thought, feelings, word or action – rather than the actors as persons the focus of attention.
- (b) Relationism brings greater recognition of, and interest in, the significance of public life and work life relationships for personal well-being. As mentioned above, some Personalists have distinguished relationships of affection where there is no goal in view from functional relationships, which exist primarily to achieve a shared goal, and they have claimed only the latter as significant for the well-being of persons. Relationism suggests all relationships – in both public and private life – contain both affective and functional elements to varying degrees, and few relationships are ever purely one or the other. Thus public life and working relationships need to be considered as much as private life relationships, since both contribute to the development and well-being of the person. This leads to practical engagement by Relationists in issues such as prisoner to prison-officer relationships and clinician to nurse relationships in hospitals, as well as in relationships between corporate bodies such as between companies, or between hospitals and health authorities.
- (c) Relationism places greater emphasis on context, e.g. the influence of national, ethnic and corporate culture on the pattern of relationships between two persons, especially when two persons relate as members of two different institutions or ethnic groups. In Christian Trinitarian categories, this is an awareness of the third factor, or actor, on relations between the other two. [Much Personalist thinking has missed out on the influence of this third factor, e.g. Martin Buber with his emphasis on the exclusivity of the I-thou encounter].
- (d) Relationism has introduced some new tools into analysis of relationships, most notably the concept of “relational proximity”; and has demonstrated the potential to recast familiar areas of public life such as justice, health, education, and the corporation in relational terms.
- (e) Relationism finds support for its operational initiatives from people on the basis of reason, intuition, experience and their understanding of revealed truth. However, Relationism has a more explicit dependence than Personalism on the ethical values of the Judaeo-Christian tradition in defining normative values of relevance to persons-in-relation. Relationism draws its inspiration largely from the shared scriptures of Christians and Jews, and the values, which

underpin the political, economic and social life described there, taking proper account of the historical and geographical context.

8. This new emphasis in the approach of Relationism opens up many new possibilities of engagement for those with a Personalist-Relationist position with the institutions and working practices of the political and economic system. To take just three examples, Relationism wants to ask the following sorts of questions:
  - (a) What is the role of land or property, in terms of ownership and conditions of use, on relations between landlord and tenant, or between one owner and another?
  - (b) What is the impact of an interest-based financial system on the pattern of interpersonal relations between lender and borrower, and more widely in society?
  - (c) How do alternative constitutional arrangements, such as federalism or, negatively, a centralisation of government decision-making, change the pattern of human relating and thus impact on personal well-being?

These questions help to develop the Personalism-Relationism approach into a fully-fledged social paradigm, which challenges materialist-capitalism as the dominant ideology of our day. This challenge is not just at the level of social philosophy, but also at the level of the laws, institutional structures and working practices to which it gives rise.

## CONCLUSIONS

Personalist thought and Relationism can be brought into a meaningful symbiotic relationship. Relationism begs the question of what or who are to be related. Personalism begs practical questions of how the value of persons and their relations are to be instantiated in the real world of public affairs. The argument of this brief paper is that Relationism provides the needed dynamic for translating Personalism into a coherent political and economic system.

### Selected Readings on Personalism

Brightman, Edgar Sheffield, "Personalism (including Personal Idealism)", in ed. Vergilius Ferm, A History of Philosophical System, Littlewood, Adams & co, Ames, Iowa, 1958, chapter 27.

Buber, Martin, I and Thou, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1937 (first British edition)

Cowburn S J, John, "A History of Personalism", unpublished paper, and, The Person and Personal Acts, Parkville: JTC, 1996 ed.

Fogarty, Michael, Christian Democracy in Western Europe 1820-1953, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1957

Harris, Harriet A, "Should we say that personhood is relational?", Scottish Journal of Theology, vol 51, No 2, 1998, p214ff.

Jeffreys, MVC, Personal values in the modern world, Penguin Book, London, 1962

Macmurray, John, The Personal World, 1996

McFadyen, Alistair I, The call to Personhood, CUP, Cambridge, 1990

Maritain, Jacques, Integral Humanism, 1935

Mournier, Emmanuel, The Personalist Manifesto, 1938

Oldham, J.H., Real Life is Meeting, The Sheldon Press, London, 1958