



Relationism: pursuing a biblical vision for society

by Michael Schluter

'It is now axiomatic that the big idea is an anachronistic concept. The central theme the think tanks share is that society has become too diverse and fragmented to be reduced to simple organising concepts such as the market or socialism.'

Richard Cockett, *The Times*, 8 August, 1994

Summary

This paper tells the story of my search over the last 20 years to find an alternative social paradigm which is closer to biblical norms than democratic capitalism or market socialism. Biblical teaching on this issue is found in Old Testament law where God provides a normative framework for Israelite society. Jesus says that the Law hangs on the twin commands to love God and love neighbour. Love is not a term of economics or finance, but the language of relationships. Hence the term Relationism. The principles of biblical law, interpreted in relational terms, provide a coherent basis for public policy and personal lifestyle decisions. So Relationism holds great promise for broad-based reform of society, provided it is not severed from its roots in biblical revelation.

Do we still need the 'big idea'?

The fall of the Berlin Wall marked a watershed. The day of high principle in politics is now over. What is good is what works. Policy should be assessed only on pragmatic criteria – if it works use it; if it doesn't, dump it. This is a period of single issue politics, when a plural society must live with multiple visions of what is socially desirable.

However, the pragmatic approach has problems. It takes a long time to observe the full effects of policy; so even by its own criteria pragmatism is experimentally hazardous. More fundamentally, policies are seldom if ever value neutral. Pension provision, for example, involves a choice between individual, family and state responsibility. The tax and benefit system may support marriage, or make cohabitation more financially attractive. A policy platform built on a case-by-case approach is likely to be full of internal contradictions.

Since Margaret Thatcher's commitment to market economics, there have been few attempts to outline a coherent social vision. The Communitarian movement demands greater attention be given to issues of citizenship and community, but fails to address the causes of growing individualism. The Green movement has gained a place on the national agenda, but is peripheral to many central political concerns such as urban unemployment and the future of the NHS.

Some look back with nostalgia to the utopian dreams of the Christian past. The Reformation vision of the 'Christian commonwealth' might appeal, but how do we first restore widespread belief in God strong enough to shape personal behaviour? Likewise the Christian Socialist ideal looks fatally flawed when state control of the economy is reduced to an occasional nervous tug at a corporate sleeve.

Seeking an alternative to capitalism, Marxism and socialism

My search for an alternative social vision built on biblical foundations stretches back over 20 years. The story begins in East Africa in the 1970s. Kenya was then at the centre of ideological debate. In neighbouring Tanzania, Nyerere was implementing 'ujamaa socialism', which included forcibly removing peasants from traditional homesteads into villages. To the North, the autarchic rule of Hailé Selassie was about to be replaced by a repressive Marxist regime. In Kenya itself, barely restrained capitalism was introducing extreme income inequalities. African Christian leaders were seeking a biblical response to these regimes.

Contemporary Christian reflection in Britain centred on identifying biblical principles to critique public policy. The Left stressed justice; the Right stressed stewardship. However, such general principles were inadequate to evaluate compulsory villagisation in

volume 6

number 4

december 1997

ISSN 1361-7710

Writing Group

D.R. Alexander Ph.D.

R.D. Clements Ph.D.

J.R.D. Coffey Ph.D.

R. Macaulay M.A. B.D.

P.S. Mills Ph.D.

A.J. Rivers LL.M.

M.G.G. Schluter Ph.D.

C.J. Townsend M.A.

Subscriptions

PO Box 27

Cambridge CB1 4GL

Tel/Fax: (01223) 501631

email: cpapers@campublic.co.uk

Tanzania. The story circulated that the bishops in Tanzania had been asked by Nyerere to critique his policies. When they had nothing to say, he asked for their public support. Was there really no biblical basis for critical evaluation?

My discussions with Roy Clements, then pastor at Nairobi Baptist Church, pointed towards a fresh look at Old Testament law as an ethical foundation for public life. New Testament ethics were given largely to Christians; they assume the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit and were given to guide individuals and the church rather than societal behaviour. So the command by Jesus to 'turn the other cheek' is not an appropriate basis for sentencing armed robbers in a law court. Jesus himself points to OT law as the God-given source of ethical teaching when urging his disciples to act as salt and light in society, in the tradition of the prophets (Matthew 5:11-20). He underlines that the Law continues to be God's standard for unregenerate society (Matthew 5:17-19), given in part as an accommodation to the hardness of the human heart (Matthew 19:8).

From the summer of 1975 we undertook a careful and systematic study of the political, economic and social system contained in the Law of Moses. This proved a rich and rewarding enterprise. Although the laws appeared at first sight to be a random collection, closer study revealed remarkable internal consistency. The interlocking themes which emerged are considered later. Suffice to say, here was a coherent pattern of political economy which had self-evident relevance to the questions we had been seeking to answer in East Africa.

Overcoming the objections

Having 'discovered' the OT law, we were confronted with a host of reasons why we should not seek to apply it to life today. Each had to be worked through. Four of the more important objections were:

(i) *'The Law has no continuing role in the New Testament'*

A superficial reading of the New Testament makes it appear that the Law has been abolished by the coming of Jesus. Paul, for example, says that 'Christ is the end (or goal) of the Law' (Romans 10:4). But Jesus insists that he has not come to abolish the Law (Matthew 5:17) and Paul elsewhere says that 'the Law is good if one uses it properly' (1 Timothy 1:8). Fortunately, Chris Wright's doctoral thesis helped to clarify the role of the Law for the Christian. He found three levels of fulfilment or application: typological, eschatological and paradigmatic.¹ The last of these, that Israel's distinctive social organisation was part of its calling to be 'a light to the Gentiles' (Isaiah 42:6), had immediate relevance for our work.

(ii) *'There is no mandate for Christians to promote OT law in society today'*

The immediate answer lies in the incentive offered by Jesus, 'those who practise and teach the Law will be great in the kingdom' (Matthew 5:19). There is some intrinsic link between law and kingdom. As Paul says, the Law is a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ (Galatians 3:24). However, if the kingdom is only where the rule of Christ is acknowledged in people's hearts, what is Christ's relationship with the rest of humanity? The New Testament claims that Christ's *reign* is over all humanity, both as creator and as redeemer, whether people recognise it or not (Matthew 28:20). So Christians have the God-given authority to address society with both law and gospel.

(iii) *'The Law upholds a society based on patriarchy and slavery'*

The gender issue is complex and some allowance must be made for cultural context. However, agricultural societies cannot allow land inheritance to pass down through both sons and daughters or plots become even more quickly subdivided and scattered. This was clearly an issue in Israel (Numbers chapters 27 and 36). The Law chooses the patriarchal route, consistent with the Genesis account. With respect to slavery, Israel's institution was a far cry from life in ancient Greece or Rome. Slaves in Israel were allowed to run away (Deuteronomy 23:15-16), and were released every seventh year

(Deuteronomy 15:12-15). Indeed, OT slavery is more like a domestic service contract, albeit giving considerable power to the householder. It was in effect punishment in the community for a thief or a person in debt (Exodus 22:3), and was probably more humane than the social exclusion and enforced inactivity of a modern prison.

(iv) *'It is not clear which parts of the Law should be applied today'*

While many of the laws and their penalties are part of Israel's ceremonial law, and thus are fulfilled in Christ and no longer binding on the Christian (e.g. the food laws), Jesus insists no part of the Law can be entirely dismissed on grounds of cultural irrelevance (Matthew 5:17). The reformers' categories of moral, civil and ceremonial law are helpful if seen to describe different purposes rather than different types of law. One specific command, to keep the Sabbath holy, for example, may be regarded simultaneously as having moral, civil and ceremonial functions. It is the moral-civil function of the Law, not its role as a sign of the OT covenant (Exodus 31:13), which is relevant to the ordering of society today.

There were many other objections we faced in the early years of pursuing this approach. It seemed that Christians had found many reasons over the last 300 years not to study the application of the Law to contemporary society.

What principles for political economy?

The next step was to ascertain which principles in the Law could be applied today, in a largely secular context. We identified, among others, these:

- The foundation of the state should be a covenant or promise between regions or sections of society which binds the parties together for good or ill, as in a marriage, so that there is commitment to resolving disputes rather than resorting to force or withdrawal.
- The Family (extended family) should be given as great a role as possible to ensure its long-term cohesion. This should include economic and welfare functions as well as provision of emotional support, and nurture and education of children.
- All Families should have geographic roots in a physical location and some permanent stake in property. This helps to ensure proximity in Families and stable local communities, and also some equality in social relationships while allowing differences of wealth.²
- Surplus money should be channelled as far as possible within Families and communities where returns are non-pecuniary, or provided as equity capital to business so that risk is shared fairly between suppliers and users of capital.³
- Crime should be regarded not as the individual breaking the rules of the state, but as a breakdown of relationship between offender and victim, and between offender and local/national community.
- The power of central government should be restrained to ensure participation of people in decisions governing their lives. 'Subsidiarity' encourages direct political involvement and helps develop relationships within the local community.
- National unity is to be built not on military or executive centralisation, but on a national system of law, education and medicine informed by shared values and aspirations.

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

Identifying the 'big idea' of the Law

By 1981 much of the groundwork had been completed. We had studied the economic and social implications of the Jubilee laws for land; implications of the interest ban, and why it did not extend to foreigners; political structures; the role of the Levites; welfare arrangements and military organisation. But one issue still troubled us: what held all these laws together? In brief, capitalism was concerned primarily with the deployment and growth of capital, while socialism focused on the role and organisation of the collective, and advocated community ownership and control of the

1 See Christopher J H Wright, *Living as the People of God*, (Leicester, Inter-Varsity Press, 1983).

2 For discussion of the roots principle and the Old Testament Jubilee, see *Cambridge Papers* Vol 4, No 4.

3 For more detailed discussion of the ban on interest, see *Cambridge Papers* Vol 2, No 1.

means of production. What was the central theme of the biblical pattern found in OT law?

The answer was found to be as simple as it was profound. After replying to a slightly different question from a lawyer, Jesus went on to address directly the question I was asking:

'Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?' Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matthew 22:36-40).

Love, of course, is not the language of finance or economics: it is the language of relationships. God measures a society, Jesus says, not by the size of its GNP or by the efficiency of its markets, but by the quality of its relationships.

Such a finding is hardly surprising. Christianity is a relational religion. John points out that God is not an isolated individual living in a silent universe. Rather, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' (John 1:1). As John Zizioulas has observed:

*'The chief lesson is that if God is essentially relational, then all being shares in relation: there is, that is to say, a relational content built into the nature of being. To be is to exist in relation to other beings.'*⁴

Other aspects of Christian doctrine are equally focused on relationships. The central term 'covenant' is a promise which establishes and shapes a relationship. The atonement is explained by Paul as bringing about reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-19), the restoration of a broken relationship. Eternal life is a developing relationship (John 17:3). Paul teaches that spiritual gifts, knowledge and generosity to the poor are worth nothing without the right quality of relationships (1 Corinthians 13:1-3). From the moment of conversion, the individual is called to become part of a new community and not to live or act in isolation (e.g. Ephesians 2:19). The language of relationships is pervasive in Christian doctrine and experience.

Relationships: what relevance to public policy?

After the insight in 1981 that relationships were the key to interpreting and applying OT law today, there was a gap of ten years before the next steps were taken towards applying this insight consistently into public life. It was not immediately obvious how it could be used to develop improved approaches to diverse areas such as economic policy, financial services, the NHS and the prison system.

In the meantime, in 1985, I was drawn into running the Keep Sunday Special Campaign. To have any chance of winning, a wide coalition of retailers and unions had to be brought together to work with the churches. As the spokesman for such a coalition, it was not possible to use explicitly Christian arguments. The case had to rest on family life, protection of low-paid shopworkers from pressure to work unsocial hours, and environmental factors. These are hinted at in Scripture as reasons for the Sabbath institution (e.g. Deuteronomy 5:15, Exodus 20:11). The approach was consistent with Christian teaching without being labelled Christian. This was to provide a model for the future in how to balance the need to involve the wider world in seeking social reform while remaining faithful to biblical ideals.

In 1991 David Lee began to work with me on a book to examine systematically the impact of public policy on people's relationships.⁵ We developed the concept of 'relational proximity', incorporating five facets or dimensions of interpersonal relationship. The factors influencing the closeness of a relationship could be assessed in terms of:

- quality of communication (directness)
- frequency, regularity and amount of contact, and length of relationship (continuity)
- variety of context of meetings (multiplexity)

- mutual respect and fairness in the relationship (parity)
- shared goals, values and experience (commonality).

The opportunity to work with the Scottish Prison Service to assess the quality of relationships between prison officers and prisoners led to the development of a formal measurement tool based on relational proximity. This tool has since been applied in companies and homes for the elderly, and between organisations in the NHS. Although without explicit biblical foundation, relational proximity helped to identify the impact of much biblical law on the structure of neighbour relationships.

Many features of Western society today undermine relational proximity. High levels of mobility make it difficult for people to develop close relationships with neighbours. Modern communications have had the effect of dividing our time among more and more people, so that each contact tends to become more superficial; television and the music culture often inhibit conversation; town planning norms and high-rise buildings have lessened opportunities for people to have frequent contact; the large size of companies, schools and hospitals today reduces frequency of interaction between colleagues.

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

Relational lifestyle

The relationships theme overcomes the artificial divide in much liberal thought between justice in public life and virtue in private life. Christians wishing to think and act relationally in their lives at work and at home will study the life of Jesus, who shows us how to relate to God and to other people perfectly, both by his life and in his teaching. This covers every area of life. 'Agape love', which does not love 'because of' but 'in spite of', is the ultimate goal for the Christian (1 John 4:7-12).

The primary requirement of a relational lifestyle is the need for long-term, deep, committed relationships. These will generally be focused within the Family but also reach outside it. To achieve such relationships, roots are critical; this is the why teaching about the Jubilee, which is primarily concerned with maintaining roots, is foundational to the social structure of OT law.⁶

Time is the currency of relationships. In society today, technology facilitates contact with greater numbers than ever before, but such wider contact is generally characterised by greater superficiality. To have a few close and deep friends, inside and outside the extended family, it is essential to prioritise relationships. Jesus sets relational priorities in his ministry after much prayer (e.g. Mark 3:13-17, 5:37). His relationship with his Father in heaven always takes priority over all other relationships (e.g. Mark 1:35-37).

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

Relationism: secular ideology or Christian strategy?

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

Some would prefer to regard Relationism potentially as the basis

4 Report of the BCC Study Commission on Trinitarian Doctrine Today, *The Forgotten Trinity* (London: British Council of Churches, 1989) p 16.

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

6 See Michael Schluter, 'Roots: Biblical Norm or Cultural Anachronism?', *Cambridge Papers* Vol.4, No.4, December 1995.

for a Christian political party. This route presents serious difficulties. The Christian Democratic parties of continental Europe have demonstrated the dangers of baptising the politics of the Right (Germany) or the Left (Holland) with the name of Christ. While the values of political life can be drawn from the Bible, and as moral absolutes can be appropriately termed 'Christian', it is dangerous to attach the same label to the socio-economic means chosen for their implementation. In South Africa, for example, failure to distinguish between principled rejection of apartheid, and the specific policy of sanctions as a way of combating apartheid, unnecessarily alienated some from the church.

The Relationships Foundation (RF), which I helped to establish in 1993 as a catalyst to help make Britain into a more relational society, is based on Christian values, while not requiring any theological beliefs of its supporters.⁷ Following the earlier model of the Keep Sunday Special Campaign, the RF simply states that it is founded on the ethical values of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Thus its framework can be endorsed by any who recognise the central importance of good relationships for human well-being, and who are persuaded by rational argument or intuition that the underlying principles are sound, regardless of their source.

So Relationism is less than a fully Christian framework of thinking. By focusing on love for neighbour exclusively, it fails to require the first commandment, to love God. The absence of the vertical dimension of relationships means that the essential motivation for building strong social bonds and restoring broken relationships, even at personal cost, is missing. There is a danger that Relationism becomes mere moralism, a reincarnation of the worthy but relatively ineffectual Moral Rearmament Movement. However, in seeking to influence a society where Christians are a minority, Christians cannot appeal to the first commandment, to love God, in the way that the OT prophets did. Such an appeal today is the task of evangelism.

In focusing public policy and personal lifestyle on the issue of relationships, Relationism is speaking in the categories and language of Christianity. It has been termed a 'translation strategy', helping to express in contemporary terms many of the core concerns of biblical teaching.⁸ If the Law plays the role of a schoolmaster to bring people to Christ (Galatians 3:24), Relationism must occupy the middle ground

between on the one hand setting out ethical standards which do not assume that people are already in a relationship with Christ, while on the other hand affirming the relational nature of all reality.

Promoting Relationism into the new millennium

For those who are convinced that it is possible to derive a biblically-based agenda for political, economic and social reform using the relational approach, it is essential not just to analyse what is wrong in society but also to try and change it. Jesus called us not to be passive onlookers, but to be active as salt and light. The task is immense. Western societies are locked into an individualistic and materialistic worldview which is reinforced by the priorities of the mass media, especially commercial advertising, and by the preoccupation of political parties with economics and human rights. The centralisation of state power, and individualisation of financial services (e.g. pensions, insurance, savings), provide further reinforcement. How can this stranglehold be broken?

The day of the think tanks is passing away; it is no longer sufficient simply to promote ideas at an intellectual level. Policy is made increasingly after practical experiment, pilot schemes and regional initiatives. If Relationism is accepted as a strategy for Christian political and personal engagement, we can expect widespread reform initiatives at national, regional and local levels based on relational thinking. Those in national and local politics, in business and financial services, in the professions and in caring roles will work to a fresh agenda.

Whether Relationism has a long-term impact on Western society will depend, I believe, primarily on whether it stays in touch with its biblical roots. Divorced from biblical teaching, it will lack the coherence and cutting edge derived from the wisdom of God's revelation in Scripture. It will also fail to attract and sustain the support of Christians who recognise explicitly or intuitively the truth and wisdom of its approach. If constantly renewed with the insights of biblical reflection, it may challenge successfully the dominant Western ideologies of global capitalism and market socialism.

Dr Michael Schluter is the founder and director of the Jubilee Centre, a Christian research and campaigning organisation based in Cambridge. He is also director of the Keep Sunday Special Campaign and the Relationships Foundation. He has a PhD in agricultural economics from Cornell University and worked in East Africa for six years as a consultant for the World Bank and the International Food Policy Research Institute. Dr Schluter co-authored The R Factor (1993) and contributed chapters to Relational Justice (1994) and Building a Relational Society: New priorities for public policy (1996).

7 The Relationships Foundation, 3 Hooper Street, Cambridge, CB1 2NZ, E-mail: RF@cityscape.co.uk

8 John Ashcroft and Christopher Townsend, *Political Christians in a Plural Society* (Jubilee Centre, Cambridge, 1994) p.81.

Next issue: A brief theology of time