



Christian Social Reform What is the Agenda?

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by Michael Schluter

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN VISION FOR SOCIETY? What kind of society should we seek - not just at a general level but at a specific level in terms of health, education, urban regeneration, finance and so forth. This is my subject for this lecture. There is a pressing need for us to develop our thinking on this because, in a society in conflict, the key decisions about the future are made while the conflict is still in progress. For example, the kind of society that we got at the end of the Second World War was already determined when the fighting stopped. The Atlee government had already made all the major decisions about what would be implemented in the years that followed. In the same way, when conflict ends in Northern Ireland the kind of society you end up with will be determined by the decisions made and the agendas set now. So you have to think ahead before the conflict is fully resolved. And the real issue you need to think about is what kind of society do you want in Northern Ireland in the years to come.

The question of an agenda is not a trivial one. What will be the policy agenda of the partners in the Northern Ireland Assembly? Is it going to be the language of human rights that dominates? Is it going to be an agenda of economic growth? Is it going to be focused around freedom and choice? Or is it going to be around a word like 'modernisation' - whatever that means?

These problems of defining an agenda are clearly demonstrated by the main British political parties. Tony Blair's speech at his Party's 1999 conference was heavily criticised in the press for a lack of substance around the key words he was using. What exactly is his agenda? What is 'Blairism'? People still are not really clear. The Conservatives came up with forty-six different policy statements in October 1999, but what holds those policies together? Is it simply changes in the taxation system? Arguing that people should have more money is something people agree with, but it's not a message that grips the imagination or fires the heart.

Or take the problems of Christian Democracy in Europe. Based on the ideology of 'personalism,' which is based very much on relationships, there has been great difficulty in translating that into a specific policy agenda. So in Germany right-wing policies have been pursued under the term Christian Democracy, while in the Netherlands left-wing policies have been pursued under the same term. So we are left wondering what Christian Democracy stands for.

MOVING ON, WE MIGHT ask how Christians should respond to something like NHS reform. The Christian Medical Fellowship had great difficulty responding to the introduction of the internal market in the NHS. Their members were deeply divided on whether it was good or bad. But why was it that Christians could not articulate both what they agreed with and what they disagreed with at a level of principle? It seems to me that this is something to which Christians should aspire. Christians should be able to identify what values and what ends they stand for in the policy arena.

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

That is a slightly controversial position and I certainly agree that we have to look at the Old Testament through the New. But listen to these words of Jesus:

"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled by men.

You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

Do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5.3-20)

Jesus tells us that his disciples are in the tradition of the prophets. We act as the prophets acted. And Jesus gives two illustrations of what the prophets did. They acted as salt - preventing moral decay - and they acted as light - high profile light. Then he insists that he has not come to abolish the law which was, after all, the agenda of the prophets. He told them that, far from abolishing the law, he had come to fulfil it. Then, linking law and kingdom, he says that if we want to be great in the kingdom of God we should practice and teach God's law. This is not a matter of saying that if we practice the law God will be pleased with us and advance us in the Kingdom. Jesus is saying that there is an intrinsic link between practising and teaching God's law and the spread of the kingdom.

Jesus himself indicates how that linkage works. In the tradition of the prophets we are salt and light. But if we do not act as salt, if we do not prevent moral decay, then people will throw us out and trample on us. That is, we will be irrelevant to people's lives because we are not engaging with the social process. Or if we are not light we will be failing to point people towards God. Yet this is what social action is all about. It is the process of preparing people to receive the gospel. It's like ploughing before you sow. If you sow without ploughing, if you try to evangelise without showing how Christian belief impinges on wider society, you will have little impact. This is what we have seen in Britain since 1945 - a lot of evangelism, but very little fruit from it. That's because we've failed to engage with people on the social process.

I STARTED LOOKING AT the role of the law in 1975 when I was living in Kenya and subsequently working with the World Bank. We were trying to find a response to capitalism in Kenya, socialism in Tanzania and Marxism in Ethiopia. I started looking at the Jubilee laws on land and the ban on interest, the rules on kingship and the justice system. As I did so the question I asked was: What holds all these laws together? What is the big idea? We tried the idea of justice. That seemed a promising start, but we couldn't get all the laws to fit under the term justice. So we tried other ideas. We tried family. We tried stewardship. But none of these seemed satisfactory.

The turning point came when I found that Jesus himself had answered my question. He was asked, What is the greatest commandment? He replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength," and, "Love your neighbour as yourself." This love of which Jesus speaks is a relational term. Then he says that on these two laws hangs all the law and the prophets. (Matthew 22.34-40).

Suddenly it occurred to me that Jesus was saying that the whole of the law and the prophets depends on understanding the world in terms of relationships. The key questions to ask in looking at the application of the Old Testament law are: What impact does this have on relationships with God? and, What impact does this have on relationships between people?

From there I began to realise that the Bible and Christian faith are about relationships. The Trinity is a relational understanding of God. The idea of covenant refers to a committed relationship, and God enters these kinds of relationships. The cross is described by Paul in terms of reconciliation - a relational term. Ethics is about the love of God and neighbour - again relational language. Eternal life, says John, is this: that you may know the Father and the Son whom He has sent. (John 17.3)

Our goals, as Christians, are also defined in terms of relationships. Paul writes:

"I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know Him better." (Ephesians 1.17)

Paul's concern is that our relationship with God should develop and grow. Christianity is not an individualistic religion; it is a community faith. Christian lifestyle is about relationships. Paul says you may have all the knowledge in the world, you may give your body to be burned, you may give all your money to the poor, you may speak in tongues, but if you don't have love - if your relationships aren't right - then your Christianity is worth nothing. (1 Corinthians 13.1-3)

That must be one of the most challenging statements in the Bible, for few of us would claim to have perfect relationships. But despite the problems we all have in our relationships, it is by these that we will be judged. When we meet Christ He's not going to ask us how much money we left in our bank account or what size of house we lived in. He's going to ask us about our relationships.

I believe that biblical law is God's revelation of how to apply relational priorities in a specific historical context. This biblical social vision is summarised in the word righteousness (Hebrew *tsdq*), meaning right relationships in society. Martin Luther King's famous 'I have a dream' speech inspired the whole civil rights movement in the United States. What was his dream for American society? What was it that he longed for? It was that blacks and whites would come to live together in real harmony. That was his vision, his dream. And that was an expression of *tsdq*, of righteousness, of right relationships. While we may have reservations about King's personal life and ethics, I think that expression of public ethics comes close to the biblical vision.

There are, of course, some objections to using biblical law today. I don't intend to spend time on those now.¹ I want to focus instead on the question of where Jesus fits in once we say that biblical law is an important category for thinking about public policy.

The first thing to say is that Jesus demonstrates perfect relationships. It is to Him that we have to look for our model. His relationship with women is very interesting. I'm sure you can think of the many examples in His ministry where Jesus demonstrates His respect for women.

IT IS ALSO INTERESTING to reflect on the fact that while

Jesus had perfect relationships, they were of varying depth with different people. So, for example, some people He only met once, often as part of a crowd. With the twelve disciples He developed relationships of considerable depth. With three of the disciples He seems to have developed particularly close and special relationships. So Peter goes up the Mount of Transfiguration while his brother Andrew is left behind. God does not expect us to have deep relationships with everybody. Jesus didn't. Yes, He had perfect relationships, but they were of varying depth with people according to the way He believed the Father led Him. Jesus managed His time in that sense in ways that I think many of us could learn from.

Equally, Jesus understood that many issues, around money or health for example, were really about relationships. The paralytic lowered through the roof wanted his health restored. But the first thing Jesus said was, "Your sins are forgiven." Jesus deals with the relationship between the paralytic and God before He does anything about his physical condition. So Jesus looked at this man's health needs from a relationship perspective rather than a physical perspective.

Second, Jesus demonstrates the full meaning and application of relational values and priorities. He applies the laws governing actions to cover attitudes also. And Jesus speaks on a number of occasions about the way money in particular affects relationships. He uses debt as a way of talking about the relational consequences of sin. And in one parable He shows the importance of using our money in ways that build relationships. He says that when money is a thing of the past we should aim to have made friends for ourselves in heaven. (Luke 16.9) Money has huge impact on relationships and Jesus discusses it at length.

Above all, Jesus provides a solution to the breakdown of relationships. It seems that at all levels, there is a constant problem of dysfunctional relationships and broken relationships. In Kosovo, perhaps more than ten thousand people were killed in ethnic violence. Yet I've been in Rwanda where they remind us that they lost ten thousand people every day for ninety days in a row and nobody from Europe ever intervened for them. No

one ever spent fifteen billion pounds on some form of intervention in Rwanda. Yet the violence there was on a totally different scale from anything seen in Kosovo, let alone Northern Ireland.

How do you build relationships after genocide? How do you overcome years, decades, of bitterness in a country like Rwanda? I have to say that it's very difficult to find any form of solution without going back to the cross. There is no motivation to forgive people who have wronged you, who drove out your family or as neighbours, murdered your family. What do you say to a church leader who speaks bitterly of the other side? What do you say to him when you realise that he lost his wife and five children in the genocide? What does it feel like to lose your family to people who murdered them simply because they were from the other side? What hope is there in that situation without the cross?

Britain doesn't face a breakdown in relationships of that kind, but in western culture at the end of the second millennium, relationships are breaking down in an unprecedented way. I can't speak for Ulster because I don't know this part of the world so well, but in mainland Britain I can speak with a considerable knowledge, and I regard the relational breakdown as very severe, particularly within the family. Nearly fifty percent of marriages now end in divorce with all the consequences of that for children. Recently a child psychologist suggested that the vast majority of children find it very difficult to ever overcome the effect of a divorce. Of course, there are all kinds of factors involved in divorce but I think we shouldn't underestimate the immense consequences of this on the relationships in our society.

Why is it happening? What's going on? What's driving it? In the light of our understanding of what the Bible teaches we have come to see certain issues as key. First, there is the loss of faith in God. Perhaps people lose the motivation to sustain a marriage if they've lost their faith. Second, there is the loss of a sense of place. Many people in mainland Britain don't know the names of their next door neighbours.

THEN THERE IS THE IMPACT of capital markets and the individualisation of finance. People today have personal bank accounts, personal pensions, personal insurance, and people are taxed individually. Indeed, the government encourages us to do our savings individually by setting up individual savings accounts. If, financially, the world is organised on the basis of individualism, how then can we expect to encourage a strong sense of family and community? We don't do things together; we have no sense of shared purpose.

Or take our criminal justice system where we punish people through social exclusion. Look at the welfare system which provides people with a certain amount of money but ignores relational issues - if you don't give people work to do you don't affirm their position in the community.

Consider the impact of new technologies. Time is the currency of relationships but we only have a fixed amount of time each day. You can use that time to have a very small number of relationships but have them in great depth. Or you can use it to have an enormous number of relationships which will, inevitably, be much shallower. And what is happening with the new information technologies and communication technologies is that we are in touch with more and more people every day but at a shallower and shallower level. I have heard it said that we meet as many people in a week as a medieval person met in a lifetime. It makes you think doesn't it?

In responding to these issues we have tried to take this relationship theme and to translate it into a basis for public policy.² In the area of criminal justice we've tried to develop the concept of relational justice, which bears some similarities with concepts of restorative justice. We argue that the purpose of the justice system is not just to uphold the moral order but to put things right between the offender and the victim.

On the issue of finance we've been looking at the implications of the biblical prohibition on interest which we believe Jesus underlines in Matthew 25. Jesus is suggesting that a loan contract based on interest gives the lender a financial return which is fundamentally illegitimate. The lender is reaping where he has not sown. (Matthew 25:26-27)

We are also looking at health matters. In particular we are looking at how we define health. Ill health is not simply the invasion of a micro-organism into the body to be combated by medical technology. We also need to look at the role of stress in ill-health, examining the link between cancer and bereavement or moving house. Relationship issues are a major cause of ill health.

In the area of urban regeneration we look at the city, not just as a place in need of physical regeneration, but as a matrix of relationships. We then look for ways to deal with people's relational needs as well as their physical or financial needs. I hope this shows that there is potential for Christians to define a whole relational agenda. And I very much hope that some of you here tonight might begin to define that agenda for Northern Ireland.

What are the implications for Christians in the political environment? Well, firstly, we believe that it is vital to build support for this relational approach to a shared social vision across all sections of the community now. So we would want to encourage ECONI to get involved in looking at the agenda for Northern Ireland. Equally, we would want to see Christians bringing the relational approach into every level of public life - into companies, into the civil service, into local government, into charities. In all of these areas there is the potential to start to look at policy and life in terms of relationships, and we want to encourage every Christian to start bringing those relational values into their areas of work.

As for churches and individual Christians, we would like to encourage a greater commitment to rediscover and study the biblical text. In particular, it's time to go back to some of those lost books of the Old Testament and give them some serious attention. There also has to be a commitment to forgiveness in personal experience. Our experience in Rwanda has shown us that there is no hope of forgiveness in public life unless Christians are prepared to forgive in their private life, although it is not as easy as we often assume. Yet unless we can forgive in our experience as Christians there is no hope of forgiveness in the public sphere at all. Forgiveness in public life has to come as a spill-over from forgiveness in our own personal experience.

FINALLY, I WANT TO STRESS the priority of evangelism over social action as the foundation of relational motivation and, more importantly, as recruitment for God's eternal kingdom. I say that as someone who has given his life to social action, having been deeply involved for at least twenty-five years in trying to bring Christian values into public life. But I still believe that evangelism is the priority for Christians. I believe we must see our social action not just as part of a creation mandate, not just as part of our stewardship of God's creation - though it undoubtedly is this - but also as part of the second great commission to make disciples of all nations.

Just as John the Baptist prepared the people for the coming of Christ, so the work we do in trying to transform society and trying to bring our values into society, into our schools and hospitals, into our businesses, into every area in which people work, is a preparation. That engagement with society is where people see what our Christianity really means. For if we say we are passionate about our relationship with Jesus Christ but

then show no concern for the society around us, then people are going to conclude that our commitment doesn't mean very much. Therefore, our attempts to transform society are vital as a precondition and as a foundation for evangelism. While the changes we may make in the social or political order are important we have to realise that of even greater importance is the membership of and recruitment into the kingdom, for that has eternal significance.

We mustn't lose sight of that overwhelming mandate that we have from Jesus Himself to make disciples of all nations, introducing them to a relationship with Christ and helping them to grow in that relationship. This caveat is also found at the end of the passage from Matthew that I quoted. Jesus says, "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." No amount of practising and teaching the law will get a person into heaven - for that there has fundamentally to be an act of God's grace.

1. I have dealt with some of these issues in a Cambridge Paper Relationism: pursuing a biblical vision for society (Cambridge Papers 6.4 December 1997)

2. For more comprehensive analysis see, for example, Michael Schluter and David Lee, *The R Factor* (Hodder & Stoughton: London, 1993); Nicola Baker (ed.), *Building a Relational Society: New Priorities for Public Policy* (Arena: Aldershot, 1996) and Jonathan Burnside and Nicola Baker (eds), *Relational Justice: Repairing the Breach* (Waterside Press: Winchester, 1994)

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