

THE CONVERSATIONAL GOD - Jonathan Tame: Jubilee Centre

You might know this story already - but even if you do, it's no bad thing to hear it again. Retelling the foundational story of any movement or organisation is key to preserving its values and transmitting its purpose.

It began with the question, 'How does the Bible view capitalism, socialism or Marxism?' A group of Christians at Nairobi Baptist Church were grappling with this in the mid-1970s, as newly independent states in East Africa were taking quite different paths towards development. 'Does the Bible merely offer tools for critiquing these different ideologies, they asked, 'Or is there a genuine alternative that could guide nations on the path to development today?'

A young economist called Michael Schluter was gripped by this question, and after some months of study, he realised that the Bible does indeed offer a coherent vision for society, and it's found mainly in biblical law. However, that raised another question: how can a framework written for an agrarian society thousands of years ago be applied today? He struggled to find an answer until one day he read Matthew 22:34-40. When asked what the greatest commandment was, Jesus replied that there were two - love God and love your neighbour - before adding, 'On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets:

It dawned on Michael that the Law set out in the Old Testament was all about how to love God with all your heart, and how to love your neighbour as yourself. Suddenly the penny dropped: love is really a quality of relationship, and biblical law shows us what loving relationships look like, in contrast to unjust or abusive ones, across a wide range of settings. For while technology, economic systems and political structures have changed beyond recognition since biblical times, human relationships haven't.

To cut a long story short, Michael left Kenya with his family and set up the Jubilee Centre in Cambridge, in order to set out policy responses to economic, social and political issues from a biblical perspective. With a focus on getting relationships right in public life, this way of understanding and applying the biblical social vision came to be called relationism, or Relational Thinking.

This story of the Jubilee Centre's origins explains why we put such an emphasis on biblical law and the centrality of relationships when responding to contemporary issues. (We've just republished the Jubilee Roadmap, summarising this vision in 30 pages.) Upstream of the biblical vision for society lies the theology of the Trinity. Before the universe came into being, before any human walked the earth, there was God, there was love, there was conversation between the Persons of the Trinity. And this God made men and women in his image and likeness as relational beings, and progressively revealed his will and purposes through the Patriarchs and the Prophets. God spoke to them; they spoke to him. Conversation. In time he promised a new covenant, by which all people could know him - from the least to the greatest. So, Jesus came, opening wide the kingdom for everyone, and the Holy Spirit continues to speak today.

Now we want to keep studying the scriptures for a deeper understanding of God's relational purposes and how they speak to the great issues of today - not so much capitalism, socialism and Marxism but individualism, consumerism and populism. We want to learn afresh how to read the Bible relationally – not just exploring key relationships in the Bible, or using a relational lens to read any passage, but also reading the Bible corporately, in relationship with other Christians – especially those from cultures other than our own.

We want to encourage everyone to start exploring this idea of reading relationally, but it will take learning and practice. Consequently, we invite you to join us on this journey, at a conference we're organizing in Cambridge from 9th-11th September - called The Conversational God. We will look for patterns and priorities for relationships across the six main genres in scripture, and compile our learning into resources which could contribute to a relational study Bible. And we'll learn about current ways people are putting relational ideas into practice across different global contexts. Will you join us?

For more details and to register, please visit jubilee-centre.org/the-conversational-god