



Jubilee Manifesto:

A Framework, Agenda and Strategy
for Christian Social Reform

Edited by John Ashcroft and Michael Schluter

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■ reviewed by Peter Heslam

Personal, organisational and social relationships are crucial to our well-being. For this reason, a focus on the significance of good relationships offers a positive and inspiring vision for social reform that is true to the Christian faith while providing a basis for co-operation with those of other faiths or none.

That is the contention of the eight authors of this timely and remarkable book. They argue that the one God, who lives as a community of three persons in perfect relationship, is the beginning and end of all relationships, including human relationships. The latter therefore lie at the heart of the biblical social vision and provide the basis for sound social, cultural and economic reform.

The authors are all thoroughly grounded in the real world and have first-hand experience of involvement in, and reflection on, social reform. This means they are more than willing to admit that faithfulness to scripture and an inclusive engagement with society are not always easy to combine. Their attempt to achieve such integration is motivated, at least in part, by a shared belief that we are facing a relational crisis in contemporary society – a crisis reflected in the sharp decline of social capital, manifested in less associational activity, lower levels of trust and less community involvement.

This book is not about social action but about social reform. In other words, it is concerned with the causes of social ills, and how they can be mitigated, rather than with the symptoms and how they can be alleviated. Reform, the editors claim, seeks to create an environment in which it is easier to live righteously: 'It is both reasonable and right to seek to mould a society so as to minimize the conflict between Christ and culture... Transforming society is about getting relationships right' (pp. 26-7).

Amidst the current widespread scepticism towards ideologies, or 'meta-narratives', it is refreshing to find a book that is unashamed about propounding a big idea. Too great a preoccupation with 'what works' (a facet of post-modernity) can result in a piecemeal approach to decision making that lacks coherence, thereby failing to present a compelling vision that can be communicated to others and that can inform, inspire and motivate positive human action. Reminders of the 'bigger picture' help to sustain a sense of purpose and meaning in our work and in our lives as a whole.

After setting out a biblical framework, the chapters engage with a variety of social spheres, according to the expertise of their authors. There are chapters on

nationhood, government, family, welfare, finance, economy, international relations and defence. This is an impressive range, though readers of this journal are bound to be somewhat disappointed that the chapters on finance and the economy focus more on the evils of usury and limited liability than on issues of greater concern to those in business who are prepared to work with, rather than against, the general ordering of economic relationships within a market economy.

However, a key reason this book is so timely and remarkable is the fact that, although it is deeply Christian, and explicitly biblical, it presents a credible model of engagement with the wider world. This is entirely deliberate. As the editors point out, Christians do not have a privileged position from which to shape the institutions of contemporary society. Therefore, the biblical vision needs to be commended as a shared vision that presents a demonstrably plausible account of human flourishing. Effective communication requires some form of translation and effective action requires a shared agenda. The language and agenda of relationships addresses both these needs in a way that is as attractive and compelling as it is biblical and theological. ■

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