

Alternative Public Theologies and Their Implications for Social Policy and Practice

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Aims

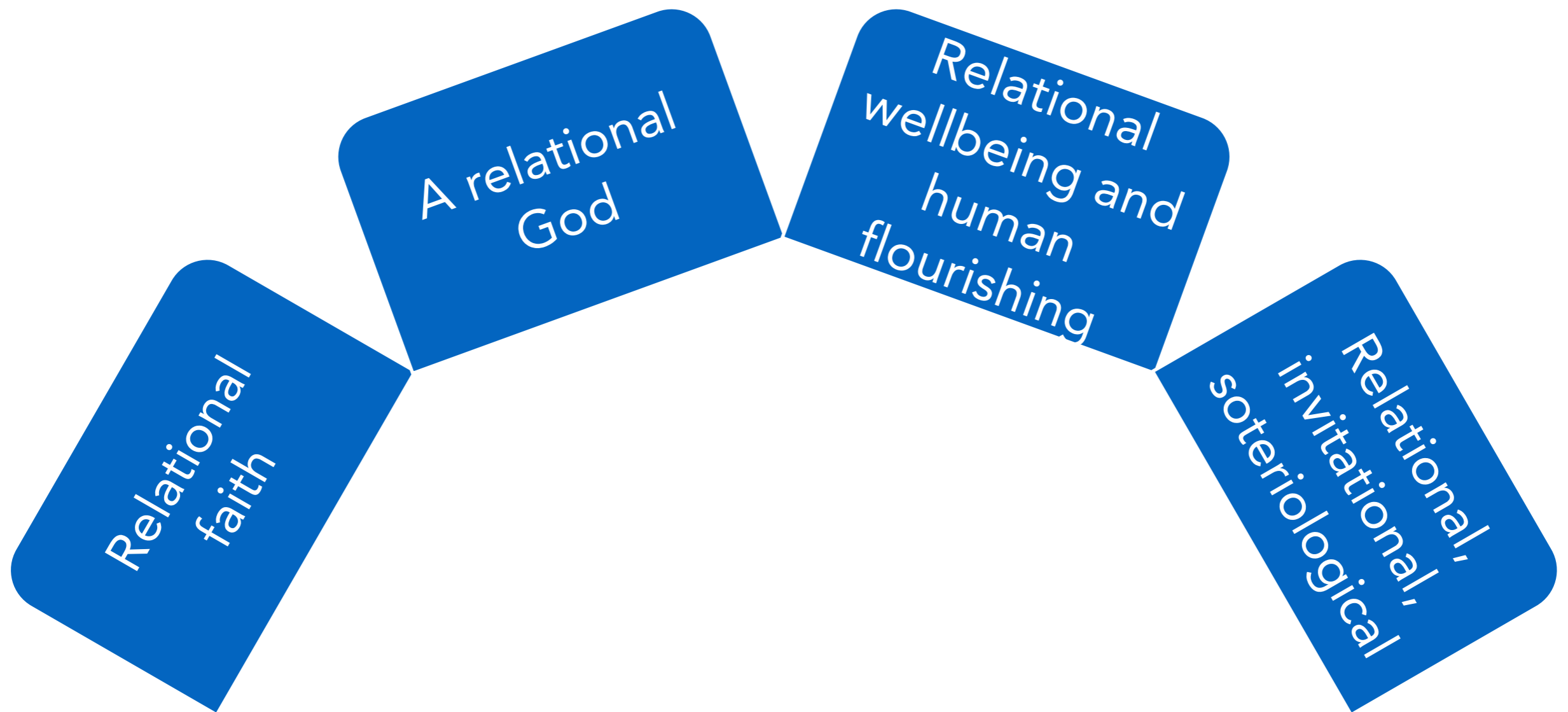
To explore the implications of our findings:

- for an empirically-informed public theology,
- for social policy

Key themes

1. Centrality of relationships – both between people and with God – to their social engagement
2. Belief in and action towards both societal and personal transformation
3. Multi-scale and diffuse nature of social engagement and impact
4. Policy implications

1. It's all about relationship



A relational faith

- Christian faith as relationship with God
- Personal experience and encounter
- Awareness of God's love
- Contrasts with typical values-based understanding of religion in public sphere
- ...and with most analyses of religion in social science

A relational God

- Inherently relational God
- Reflected in the intra-Trinitarian relationship and God's desire to relate to people
- Divine relationality runs through Genesis to Revelation



“The Trinity”
Andrei Rublev (15th century)

Relational wellbeing and human flourishing

- People are relational beings
- Importance of social relationships for wellbeing and flourishing well attested
- Human relationality rooted in and endowed through the *Imago Dei*
- All people understood to be of great - and equal - worth and dignity
- This worth cannot be lost or increased by lifestyle

Relational, Invitational, Soteriological

- Image of God damaged, relationship between God and human beings is broken
- Manifested in injustice, poverty, suffering, conflict, and abusive relationships, etc.
- Pentecostal and Evangelical soteriology - human need for reconciliation with God through Christ's work
- New believer belongs to a body of Christ locally and globally
- Everyone is invited to be part of this reconciled relationship
- Church members extend this invitation to others through prayer, acts of kindness and compassion, and personal relationships

- Commissioners, social scientists and even churches themselves are often keen to draw a strong distinction between activities that do/do not involve evangelism
- Relationship with God is seen as an intrinsic part of human wellbeing – in the present and over an eternal time frame
- Empowerment of God/Holy Spirit seen as key to personal and social transformation
- Does not mean overt/direct evangelism always involved in social action – but strong desire for others to experience God's love
- Sensitivity to power dynamics and personal choice



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- Social science often assumes that the desire for others to join one's faith is negative and manipulative
 - Our study shows this is not the only possibility
 - Potential for sharing faith to be invitational and empowering
 - Desire to see people become Christians does not preclude collaboration with other faiths/secular agencies for the common good

2. Discipleship, Transformation, and the Common Good

- Churches have a vision for discipleship that seeks transformation of the self and the world
- Christians give considerable personal time and money
- Hope for real change empowers Christian to volunteer among vulnerable groups
- Structured opportunities make such engagements possible and manageable
- Sometimes limited engagement or merely educative exposure
- Sometimes engagement is in light of a reciprocal relationship – which is open to criticism
- Church is not government sponsored
- Not all volunteers in the churches' activities are Christian



Source: "Inside the Alpha Course - British Christianity's biggest success story"
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/inside-the-alpha-course-british-christianitys-biggest-success-story-8555160.html>

- Impact on churches' own congregations should not be underestimated as a social 'good'
- Emphasis on helping people, building friendships in a city that can often be lonely and isolating
- Encourages members to succeed in their careers or personal lives
- Support groups for addictions, financial problems and migration issues
- Focus on personal transformation

- Macro-scale structural injustices unlikely to be challenged
- Lack of overt engagement with structural and systemic issues
- Some have a close affinity and influence with politicians, yet no engagement in public debate on social policy
- Two caveats: (1) understanding of the Kingdom of God; (2) social impact of these churches is distributed spatially, institutionally and across different spheres of life
- On first caveat: 'Common good' as a concept present in churches as social action is undertaken for all people

Roman Catholic teaching on 'common good':

The common good also suggests that the good of each person, the well-being of the human person, is connected to the good of other. That is, human beings only truly flourish in the context of community. Our wellbeing is experienced amidst a setting in which each persons also flourish. From this perspective we can say two things: Each of us has an obligation to contribute to the common good so that human life can flourish, and no description of the common good can exclude concern for an individual, writing off some person or group as unworthy of our interest. That is why human rights claims have become an important dimension of the common good in CST [Catholic Social Teaching]; no one should be denied the basic goods needed to join in the life of the community.

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- Common humanity requires Christians to love and serve all people
 - Seeking to bless society not just through good citizenship but also through Christian discipleship via relationship building
 - Not all people will become Christians, but they can experience some of the blessings of the kingdom in their lives
 - Christians are consciously and intentionally including the socially marginalised and disenfranchised in ways that secular, statutory services can learn to appreciate
 - There is scope for collaboration between people of different faiths and of no particular faith
 - Second caveat to be discussed in the following section

3. Scale, Structure and Social Impact

- Cannot interpret the churches' social engagement only by organisational or institutional engagement alone
- People make personal contributions
- Megachurches avoid being politically partisan
- Primary remit of the leadership is to encourage and stimulate Christian discipleship not to exert political or policy influence



KICC's Hamper Challenge
– Christmas donation drive
<https://www.kicc.org.uk/church/gallery-2/hamper-challenge/>

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- Some churches are attended by MPs and others involved in political life
 - Some churches (e.g. Nigerian) help integration of migrants into London and UK
 - Guidance, support and solidarity in the navigation of UK culture, law, employment and public services is offered
 - In some cases, there is limited member involvement, leading to overburdening of the few or smaller scale involvement
 - Leaders influencing social action - by teaching, selecting ministries to resource and support, and role models
 - Availability constraints - 'resource rich' and 'time poor' congregations

4. Policy Implications

1. Strong grounds for collaboration between churches and statutory and voluntary sector actors towards the 'common good'
2. Church growth, teaching and discipleship important for resourcing and sustaining these churches' activities
3. Megachurches represent huge resources of volunteers and there is untapped potential
4. Need for a more nuanced understanding of issues around conversion, evangelism and the sharing of personal stories about a relationship with God - talking openly about this can increase trust and confidence.

4. Policy Implications

5. Relational perspective may hold important wisdom for 're-humanising' public services and politics
6. Need for greater literacy and sensitivity, not only regarding the key festivals and teachings of different faiths, but also regarding lived experiences and worldviews
7. Societal contribution of churches reaches far beyond their organised corporate activities