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THE RELIGION OF HENRY GEORGE

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V. EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY THE GREAT SOCIAL AIM

IN the old Bowery mission they had to tear the parable of the prodigal son out of the Bible.

The reason was this: Every night they invited a different clergyman to preach the sermon. And every last preacher made straight for that parable, assuming that the prodigality of his hearers had been the cause of their poverty.

It made the men "sore," as the superintendent explained. So they tore the parable out of the mission Bible.

The preachers were wrong. That Bowery audience is not an audience of prodigal sons. Occasionally one may be found. But the most of them never had any inheritance to squander.

They had been littered in human styes. They had been swaddled in cotton rags—one blessing of the tariff on wool. They had had city streets for meadows, gutters for brooks, and hardly a blade of grass or patch of sky in all their childhood. The strength of their mothers was sold in the market. Their vitality too was sapped in the whirring mills. They had never in all their days had enough to eat. Starved cattle get the scurvy. Hungry men too get scrawny and weak, physically and morally. Cheated out of their birthright, poverty had been their destruction. They were the cast-off drudges and slaves of other men. Nothing could be farther from the truth than to liken them to the wayward youth of Jesus' famous parable.

The poverty of these people is not the kind that is caused by prodigality. They suffer from restricted opportunity.

"Oh," said the superintendent, "we would not object if the preachers would use the whole parable. They seem not to appreciate that part of the story which

suggests the importance of opportunity as a factor in redemption."

When the young man came to himself he went back to work on his father's farm. His good impulses were not thwarted by any denial of opportunity. He was not an economic slave. He had wasted his substance, but he had not forfeited his right to work. That was an inalienable right. His father's love was pledge of that.

But if the father had died in the meantime, the young man's desire to redeem himself would have been encouraged by no such open opportunity. The elder brother, as lord of the estate, would have sent him adrift with a sermon about prodigality being the cause of poverty. The good man at the Bowery mission knows perfectly well that our government is run, not by the father-love, but by the spirit of the elder brother, and that the chief affliction of the poor, whether they have been prodigal sons or not, is the fact that the law has barred them from any right to a place upon their father's farm.

When the compassion of the father in that parable is strong enough among our people to guarantee to every child of the Republic this opportunity to work, not as a slave, but as an heir and a free man, then poverty will cease to exist. Of course there will be prodigal sons. A man cannot eat his cake and keep it too. But he should have the right to make more cake. It is the social interference with this right, the failure of government to guarantee this right, that inflicts upon men the curse of poverty.

Refinements of slavery will of course persist, until civilization solves the problem, how to declare, not one year in fifty,

but every year a year of jubilee—how to prevent the alienation of any man's birthright.

Equality of opportunity is the great social aim—to give each child that is born into the world his equal share of the father's farm, and to make his possession of it secure and inalienable as long as he lives. Social evolution cannot stop short of this.

A purely agricultural state might accomplish this by providing a farm, an inalienable farm, for every child as he came of age.

But in a complex society less primitive means must be found. The Federal government has found one way in dealing with the tribe of Osage Indians. The tribal lands are leased by the government, as administrator, and the rentals are paid over to the members of the tribe, each man, woman and child receiving from the United States government a dividend of over six hundred dollars a year.

There are five million American workmen who receive less than that for a year's hard labor.

What if this continent, with its untold treasures, had been considered the common inheritance of the American people? What if the government had assumed the responsibility of administering these lands of the nation, leasing them to the biggest bidders, and dividing the proceeds equally, each year, among the men, women and children of the Republic?

Emphatically, one would not advise that. That would be reducing the people to the position of Indian wards. Every child of this Republic has, in sound morals, an inalienable inheritance in an equal share of the total unimproved value of the private and public land of the nation. To see that he gets what is his is the highest function of the state.

But the national character requires that this equity should be distributed, not in the form of unearned dividends, but in the form of increased opportunity for each and all.

This is what we claim for the program of Henry George. It is a way of preventing the forfeiture of the people's birthright. It is a way of distributing their annual share of the common gifts of God, without reducing them to the position of government wards. It is the gospel of glad tidings to the poor. This is a way of keeping an equal chance on the father's farm always open to any child of his anywhere who wishes to return. It is the beginning of the industrial salvation of the world. The preacher who pretends to point the way of salvation in our day without a knowledge and appreciation of this gospel, is a rank incompetent; he is professionally unequipped and unfit for his task. Such preachers make empty churches—a sign of the growing intelligence and deepening religion of the people.

"It is right and necessary that all men should have work to do which shall be worth doing, and be of itself pleasant to do: and which should be done under such conditions as would make it neither over-wearisome nor over-anxious.

"Turn that claim about as I may, think of it as long as I can, I cannot find that it is an exorbitant claim; yet again I say if Society would or could admit it the face of the world would be changed; discontent and strife and dishonesty would be ended. To feel that we were doing work useful to others and pleasant to ourselves, and that such work and its due reward *could* not fail us! What serious harm could happen to us then?"—*William Morris*.