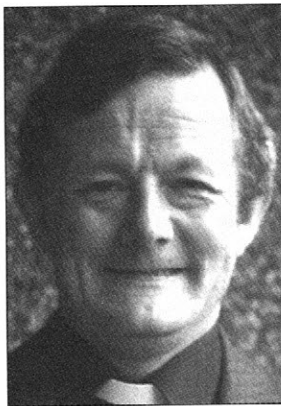


God's Gift?

Graham K. Blount, Scotland



Graham Blount is the Scottish Churches' Parliamentary Officer. For the ecumenical body "Action of Churches Together in Scotland" – one of the founding partners in the Scottish Land Reform Convention – Blount was the first to lead the Scottish Parliament in its "Time for Reflection".

Blount has previously been a Church of Scotland parish minister. He was the Honorary Secretary of the Church of Scotland's groundbreaking Church and Nation Committee, which has become a strong advocate for land reform.

Blount's particular interests are the interface between the Churches and public life, and the issues of debt, social justice and social inclusion. As a hobby he supports Clyde Football Club.

The subject of this brief paper is sin – a very specific sin – the sin of latifundianism. The story starts in rural Aberdeenshire, where a Church of Scotland parish minister found several members of his parish community threatened with eviction following the death of the local laird.

Ownership of the major local estate passed to a son, resident elsewhere, who wished to sell it and felt it would be a more marketable asset without sitting tenants; he therefore exercised his legal rights to have these tenants evicted. The parish minister brought his pastoral concern for these people in the local community to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. The Assembly was also aware at the time of a great deal of public interest and public sympathy in what was happening in Assynt where the local crofters were struggling, ultimately successfully, to gain ownership of their land. The Assembly therefore instructed its Church and Nation Committee to look at the whole issue of land tenure and use in Scotland.

Over a period of several months there was a great deal of research, listening and analysis (much of it done by a member of the Committee who is now the Minister for Rural Affairs in the Scottish Executive). To that analysis was added our theological reflection, and a wide ranging report was made to the General Assembly expressing substantial sympathy with the movement for land reform and prompting the churches in Scotland into membership of the Scottish Land Reform Convention.

This paper aims to share some of the theological reflections in the context of that report, in the hope that it will have some resonance whether or not you share the Christian faith on which it is based. It is not possible to produce a handy text from the book of Leviticus which will justify and make the case for land value taxation. But it is hoped that although the reflection is theological, it will still be realistic.

At the head of the report on land tenure and use in Scotland, was quoted a piece of doggerel

The earth belongs unto the Lord
and all that it contains,
except the Western Isles alone
for they are all MacBrayne's.

To say that this reflection is theological, then, is not to mean that it belongs up in the clouds; rather it is rooted in what is actually happening in the land of Scotland, and beyond it, because one of the key source

documents here, looking at land reform at an international level, was a Roman Catholic Pontifical Council document *Towards A Better Distribution Of Land*. This speaks of the

dramatic human, social and ethical problems caused by the phenomenon of the concentration and misappropriation of land (which) affect the dignity of millions of persons and deprive the world of the possibility of peace ... such situations are characterised by countless unacceptable injustices.

While the Pontifical Council may have been thinking more of South America than of lands in Italy for example, this insight also has to be brought closer to home.

The story of Scotland's land is bound up with its Church history and indeed a substantial part of the creation of the Free Church is bound up with resistance to the inappropriate power of land owners. So Professor Donald Macleod of the Free Church College has said:

The campaign for land reform is driven by ideals, by a desire to curtail the powerful and to empower the disempowered, by a concern for stewardship and community, by a passion for freedom and justice.

Christian tradition, then, recognises land as a crucial resource – both personal and communal – which is held in trust from God, and that we are heirs of a covenant that brings God, land and people together on the way to the promised land. In a sense the feudal system recognises this, in a pyramid of rights and responsibilities deriving from God to the Crown to the feudal superior to the vassal; this principle needs to be developed creatively for a new “conditionality” of land tenure. Part of that conditionality lies in the concept of a stewardship of land under God – sustainable development for the sake of the community and of future generations, in partnership with God. The theological contribution which the Churches have made to debates on sovereignty and power and subsidiarity can also then be reflected into the discussion on land in terms of communities taking control of their own development.

The radical justice of the Jubilee, restoring land rights to those who have lost them over the years, recognises the damage to families and to communities of concentrations of landholding. A recurrent Old Testament theme is hostility to those who “add fields to fields”. This is reflected strongly in the Pontifical Commission document on the

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relationship of land issues and world development. It is in fact the sin of latifundianism: the possession of power by those whose ownership of large tracts of land gives them inappropriate control over those who live there or otherwise depend on it. Therefore, for the Old Testament, land, which is ultimately owned by God, is not to be sold in perpetuity.

The institution of the Jubilee, by which growing injustices are remedied every 50 years, holds that land tenure should not be allowed to become concentrated in a few hands. Rather land should be periodically redistributed, so that people and families and communities should have the possibility of starting again, with the wherewithal to develop their own lives and their community life.

Since the Church and Nation Committee produced that report, we have come some distance in the debate. In Scotland currently our problem is that we think we have sorted land tenure by abolishing the feudal system of land tenure. We think we have brought land ownership into a modern context, but we have left untouched issues about proper registration of land ownership, about the distribution of land ownership and are only beginning to touch the rights of communities. It is to be hoped that the theological work just outlined provides a context for that discussion to continue in Scotland.

In the context of the theological understanding just outlined, land value taxation can be seen not as some kind of punishment for land owners, but as a rent paid to the community. It seems a more equitable way of financing local government, at least as an ingredient of local government finance, rather than the present reliance on Council Tax and Rates. Crucially, perhaps, land value taxation would have a vital influence on the developing pattern of land tenure, whereby a proper cost had to be paid for the ownership of land.

In Scotland today there is interest in the possibility of the sale of the Cuillin, a whole mountain range in Skye. It is widely recognised as a bizarre and absurd idea that one individual should own a whole mountain range. It recently seemed just as bizarre and absurd to have people dropping in in flying boats and by other means to look at the land of Assynt, to consider whether they might fancy owning part of it, while the people whose lives depended on that land could only look on.

This is a powerfully emotive issue in Scotland but is not just an emotive one. It is about the ability of communities to build their own future, but it starts with the question: "Whose Land is it anyway?"