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## Henry George, Biblical Morality and Economic Ethics:

### *Some Conclusions from a Lifetime's Study of the Relation Between Ethics and Economics\**

By PRESTON BRADLEY †

ABSTRACT. The writer [Dr. Preston Bradley] discovered *Henry George* through reading one of his great literary followers, *Leo Tolstoy*; later the author came to know intimately many prominent *Single Taxers*. The experiences convinced him that the basic *economic* ideas of George cannot be successfully challenged. As a religious leader, the writer believes that *religion* should never and cannot ever be separated from life. So he believes that the application of *ethics* to economic life is as religious as the statement of Christianity's oldest and most sacred creed. George formulated a reformed system for *capitalism* based on *biblical morality*, the highest ethical standards of the

\* An address given on the occasion of the presentation of the Centennial Edition of *Progress and Poverty* to the Public Library of Chicago on October 10, 1979, at a gathering in Preston Bradley Hall of the Library's Cultural Center. The book was presented by William Ranky of the Henry George School of Chicago on behalf of the school, and accepted by Commissioner Donald Sager, in charge of public library operations in the City of Chicago. It was read by Dr. Bradley's wife, Mrs. June Haslet Bradley, who prepared the paper as an abstract of Dr. Bradley's lifelong studies on the subject.

† [Rev. Dr. Preston Bradley, D.D., LL.D., founder and senior pastor of the non-denominational People's Church, Chicago, now in his ninth decade, is a leading philosopher and theologian and is well known to the people of the U.S. midwest and elsewhere through his radio and television lectures. Mrs. Bradley said, regarding the provenance of the material: "In preparing this paper, I made use of studies extending over a long lifetime. I reviewed material in the Manuscript and Tape Collections and the Preston Bradley Papers of the Library of the University of Illinois, Chicago Circle Campus, and in scrapbooks of a private collection."]

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modern age and its most exalted insights. We live in an age of continuing economic crisis. We must infuse our *moral and religious principles* into our *economic system* or we are lost. This is a responsibility bequeathed us by the wisest and best thinkers of the past, among the greatest of whom was Henry George.

THERE WERE but few books in my childhood home in Linden, Michigan. We were poor and books cost money. Yet among those few books on our shelves was a paper bound copy of *Progress and Poverty* and a pamphlet, *The Irish Land Question*, both by Henry George. I never saw anyone reading them, however. In those days millions of copies of Henry George's great book were gathering dust on the shelves of millions of other homes throughout the English-speaking world, for like other great classics, even the Bible, *Progress and Poverty* at the turn of the century was a book to be purchased, to be widely talked about, and to be largely unread.

My own discovery of Henry George came through my reading of the novels of Leo Tolstoy. You cannot read Tolstoy and not know Henry George. Several times in his novels, Tolstoy interrupts his narratives to speak of his admiration for Henry George and to explain his remedy for the abolition of poverty. In *Resurrection*, one of Tolstoy's best novels, his central character, a vast landowner, sees the full horror of the wretched, starving conditions of the peasant farmers on his estates. "It must end. It ought not to be," he says to himself. Then Tolstoy has his leading character recall the words of Henry George: "The land cannot form an object of ownership, purchase or sale any more than the water, than the air, than the rays of the sun. Everybody has an equal right to land and all the privileges it gives to people." After that, his hero, like Tolstoy himself did, renounces the right of land ownership.

It was not long after that, that I read the Henry George books on our shelves—first the *Irish Land Question* and then *Progress and Poverty* itself, and I think they should be read in that order today. *The Irish Land Question* is not only of interest to the people of Ireland and to the families of Irish descent in America, like ours was, it is a human document, deserving to stand alongside the *Declaration of Independence*, and Thomas Paine's *Crisis*, *Common Sense* and *The Rights of Man*. It is the finest introduction to Henry George's whole philosophy and economic principles that I know (1).

Later in Chicago I came to know intimately many prominent Single

Taxers, among them Clarence Darrow, Judge Holly, Hiram Loomis (Principal of Hyde Park High School), Otto Cullman (author, business man and inventor) and Henry Harding (of engineering fame). These friends taught me a great deal about Henry George's philosophy and, as all of you who have ever known any Single Taxers will readily confirm, they often taught me more than I wanted to learn.

The old timers never missed an opportunity. There was a time when I would give them a bit of argument, since it is against my liberal temperament to accept any gospel—religious, social, or other—as final. But soon I learned that the economic premises of Henry George cannot be successfully challenged; they are based on common observation and knowledge. Tolstoy was right when he wrote, “people do not argue with the teaching of Henry George; they simply do not know it well enough; and it is impossible to disagree with his teaching, for whoever becomes fully acquainted with it cannot but agree.”

## II

RELIGION SHOULD NEVER be separated from life. Written in the Declaration of Principles of our church are the words: “IT (meaning the church) REGARDS RELIGION AS SPIRITUAL ENERGY DIRECTING ITSELF TOWARD THE ENRICHMENT OF THE INDIVIDUAL LIFE AND THE PERFECTION OF THE SOCIAL ORDER.” Often throughout the years in our church we have had the Henry George classes as part of the regular educational program (2). Of course, some people maintain that it is the business of the preacher as well as the church to deal only with so-called *spiritual* matters; they say the pastor should never be concerned about civic wrongs, the problems of social justice, economics, health, poverty or any of the practical areas in which man has to function as a member of society.

But who ought to be against wrong wherever it is found, more than the preacher? One of the reasons for the mess we are in is that many persons with the power to speak out have not done so. The reason that the world is in the tragic situation it is in today is largely to be found in the refusal to apply the religious ideas and ideals of morality to the practical areas of humanity.

I do not divorce from the pulpit anything which concerns a human being as to his economic, industrial, governmental, educational or religious life. We are all composite characters; we must all have food and shelter; must be clothed; we must be free of everything which

jeopardizes these things. I cannot make the distinction between Man's religious life and his active daily experience.

It is just as religious for me to stand in this pulpit on a Sunday morning and pay homage to the *Constitution of the United States*, the *Declaration of Independence*, one of *Emerson's Essays* or a chapter of Henry George's *Progress and Poverty* as it is to recite the *Apostles' Creed*, and who knows, perhaps it is more religious! For people have been reciting the *Apostles' Creed* for centuries and we still have poverty, war, and all the other evils that Jesus spoke out against during his ministry.

We have got to put the creeds into operation in human life and we have got to do that in America under regularly constituted processes of good government. And Henry George showed us how this must be done. He believed in capitalism, but he also believed in humanity. To this end he formulated a system for Capitalism that was based on Biblical morality and the highest ethical standards and insights of the modern age.

I, too, believe in Capitalism and I also believe that it must achieve a moral system, or it will perish, just as the feudal system of the Middle Ages perished in the modern world. The Great Depression was not really an economic crisis as much as it was a moral crisis. Any society in which only 5 per cent of the people own 65 per cent of the wealth—such a society is in danger.

True, I have never been a business man. I am not an economist. But I have not hesitated to have my say about economic matters. I have been told to shun such subjects, to leave economics to the economists in Washington and in the universities—to the experts—yes, the experts! But when I saw what was happening to our economy, I concluded that, if that was the best the experts could accomplish, it was time for nonexperts to have their say. It was time for a minister, who might not know too much about business indexes and the workings of the monetary system, to speak out on morality, economic justice, honesty, and the Golden Rule. We must fuse our economic system with our moral and religious principles or we are lost.

The true interest of the employer and wage earner is identical, as Henry George pointed out so eloquently. There can be no dispute about that—what is good for Capital is finally good for Labor, and what is good for Labor is finally good for his employer. It would help considerably if both could realize this truth.

Some scholars have said that Protestantism made possible the development of modern capitalism. Such may have been the case. If so, it is a special responsibility of the Protestant clergy to bring religious concepts to bear on the world of great American fortunes, high finance, and big business based on the monopoly of land and its resources.

To believe in private enterprise is to believe in Democracy. The right of individual opportunity is identified with Democracy. When such opportunity ceases, Democracy becomes Dictatorship. Our greatest problem is how to develop and preserve social security without mutilating individual enterprise, and this is what Henry George saw so clearly as the great problem of our time. Today, any form of Socialism, Communism, Fascism—any form of dictation and control by government—means the destruction of creative capitalism, and the destruction of creative capitalism ultimately means the end of human liberty.

### III

NOWADAYS, THE FOLLOWERS of Henry George are few in number, just when the world needs *most* the Great Crusader's valuable inspiration and insights. Some of you are not going to like what I have to say now, but I think that the overemphasis on the Single Tax to the exclusion of the rest of Henry George's philosophy has been largely responsible for the demise of the Single Tax movement.

Henry George was a great economist—the first to look for causes of poverty and the first to find the major cause—but Henry George was much more than an economist. He was a philosopher, a complete humanitarian, an incorruptible personality, an idealist who believed in man's personal and social capacity for infinite improvement and he was a prophet of the same class as the prophets of old in the Holy Scriptures. Not for nothing was he called "The Prophet of San Francisco."

Read again that chapter in *Progress and Poverty*—"How Modern Civilizations May Decline." He predicted in 1879 all that the historians of today are warning us about and much more that is coming to pass.

The Single Tax, much as it is needed, was never regarded by Henry George as an end in itself. He did not regard it as a panacea for the solution of all the earth's problems. And as Mrs. Edith Siebenmann always explains to her classes in the church (3), "The Single Tax is but the reform that will make all other reforms easier." And as I see

it, as a minister, the Single Tax is merely the *means*, according to Henry George, of helping to bring in the Kingdom of God—even as he himself explained so vividly in his lecture, “Thy Kingdom Come!” He believed wholeheartedly in that Kingdom spoken of by Jesus again and again—that kingdom on earth in which all mankind would be lifted up to the highest heights that dreams can envision.

To all of you who have studied *Progress and Poverty* let me say, never let Henry George be lost in his economic solution, however needful that solution may be. He was one of the world’s great dreamers—one of America’s great dreamers. And I believe that we must hold fast to his dreams and never give up! I do not believe that those of us who have been stimulated by the ideals of justice, brotherhood, peace and freedom are to be eternally damned from ever realizing them. Rather, I believe that as long as man can dream there is the possibility of realizing his dream.

Our dreams are not sent here to mock us. God is not an infinite jester; he did not put into the mind and heart of man dreams of justice, beauty, brotherhood, truth and the grandeur of life just to mock us. Our highest dreams are evidences of God’s calling us to action for, as Henry George often hopefully said, “Right Thought leads to Right Action.”

Have you, as followers of Henry George, lost faith in your hopes and dreams? Are you filled with a sense of defeat? Remember, God is helpless without man, and man can wreck himself without God but God and man together can make this world the Kingdom of Good. We had better get on with the job.

America is not the America of the trust and the monopoly and the few who own, by centralized wealth and interlocking directorates, the wealth of the nation, and who, in hours of political emergencies, exploit on the basis of prejudice and passion. That is not America! America is Ralph Waldo Emerson; America is William Ellery Channing; America is Walt Whitman; America is Henry George; America is Lincoln, and we are not the puppets and pawns upon the chessboard of fate, imprisoned by something called “human nature” with some powerful jester dangling the strings tied to our backs, putting words into our mouths and deeds into our hands and saying: “You are only puppets in a play; I will put words into your mouths and you will speak them, and you will play your little part.”

No! We are not puppets; we are Americans, and the most dangerous man or woman among us is the person who says that our dreams

are all mockery. The most valuable person in America is the person who, like the prophet of old, prefaced what he had to say with: "Thus sayeth the Lord, I will build a new heaven and a new earth." That is our job for tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow (4).

It is a job bequeathed to us by the wisest and best thinkers of the past, among the greatest of whom was Henry George.

1. I do not know what happened to our family's paperbound copy of *Progress and Poverty*, nor have I ever seen another like it anywhere.

2. The School of Religious Education of the People's Church.

3. Mrs. Edith C. Siebenmann (now retired) was for many years a member of the faculty of the People's Church School of Religious Education. Mrs. Siebenmann, a past president of the Chicago Henry George's Woman's Club, was a graduate of the first class of the Henry George School of Social Science in Chicago (founded by John Lawrence Monroe) and was a teacher at that school also.

4. These two paragraphs are from an article I published more than 35 years ago. See *The Liberalist*, October 8, 1944.

### *Meeting the Challenge of Soviet Power*

SINCE THE END of the Second World War, America has led other nations in meeting the challenge of mounting Soviet power. This has not been a simple or a static relationship. Between us there has been cooperation, there has been competition, and at times there has been confrontation.

In the 1940s, we took the lead in creating the Atlantic alliance in response to the Soviet Union's suppression and then consolidation of its East European empire and the resulting threat of the Warsaw Pact to Western Europe.

In the 1950s, we helped to contain further Soviet challenges in Korea and in the Middle East, and we re-armed, to assure the continuation of that containment.

In the 1960s, we met the Soviet challenges in Berlin and we faced the Cuban missile crises, and we sought to engage the Soviet Union in the important task of moving beyond the cold war and away from confrontation.

And in the 1970s, three American Presidents negotiated with the Soviet leaders in attempts to halt this growth of the nuclear arms race. We sought to establish rules of behavior that would reduce the risks of conflict, and we searched for areas of cooperation that could make our relations reciprocal and productive—not only for the sake of our two nations, but for the security and peace of the entire world.

In all these actions, we have maintained two commitments: to be