

God's laws, land – and the creation of wealth

IF WE ARE going to make any critique of the international economic scene, or even if we are going to make any comments about the level of reward claimed by operators within international finance, we within the Churches need to do our own homework. We may not know or have competence in all the processes of international economics; but we do need to try to make sure that we come at these issues with the most wide range possible of theological equipment. I do not believe that God has left us without resources, even though I also believe that the truth is not something merely to be dug up from the past. For Christians, perhaps the most important aspect of the truth is that it is indeed ahead of us; it is that into which the Holy Spirit is leading us.¹

Our task, therefore, is to come into a situation which is always new, in which we are always the early Church facing new and unprecedented questions, trusting that we have been given sufficient resources to work with, but also trusting that these have to be picked up and claimed in new ways from day to day. The problem is well expressed in the story of Father Ed de la Torre, that courageous priest in the Philippines, who has spent a considerable portion of his ministry in prison. When he was sent from his seminary to his first appointment, a group of parishioners confronted him saying:

"You know you Priests come to us and preach that we must worship God and go to Church on Sundays; we must not drink to excess; we must not gamble; we must not have sex outside marriage; yet such preaching is addressed to our weekends and our night-life – the periphery of our lives. But from six in the morning until six at night we are in the fields working. We are farmers. So what does the Church have to say about that? We are poor farmers who rent our land from the big landlord. He takes most of our harvest and leaves us barely enough to keep our families alive, so we have taken him to Court. But when we went to the Bishop and the Priests, and asked if they would side with us peasants they replied, "Yes, perhaps we should take sides, but that is not our central vocation because we are called to build bridges".

And then these peasants turned to Father Ed

* This is an edited extract from *On Creating Wealth*, a speech delivered by the Rt. Rev. JOHN D. DAVIES, the Bishop of Shrewsbury, to the Industrial Christian Fellowship at St. Katharine Cree Church, London.

and asked: *"Have you ever tried to build bridges starting from the middle?"*²

When I came to my present appointment I made quite a song about my own sense of vocation to be a builder of bridges. I realise that that is a valid image of our task, but also it can be a dangerously misleading one. I would go on to say that, within our Church fellowship, people like politicians, the economists, the business people, have every right to ask the ministers. *"About what subjects have you been educating people, so that they feel them to be matters of conscience?"* The idea that matters of sexual behaviour and prayer are matters of conscience, and that matters of the distribution of wealth and the proliferation of weapons of torture and death are not, cannot possibly be squared with a commitment to the rule of God over the whole creation.

IT IS FROM this point that I think we have to start, if we are to make any kind of theological contribution to the task of creating wealth. Let me speak, therefore, from a place within the community of those who go in for theological reflection, who are also ordinary citizens and therefore on the receiving end of the economic systems of our day.

Now, it has been a commonplace within the world, a very small world, of western academic theology, that we need to develop a theology that will speak to the needs of "modern man". The assumption is that modern man is fundamentally different from man of the New Testament days, that modern man has escaped from a world in which he was dominated by irrational and mindless powers, and that he has a new spiritual and intellectual freedom, having "come of age".

Now, this may possibly be true for a small number of privileged people who can call themselves "modern man" – this may well exclude "modern woman" anyway. Having spent half my ministry in Africa, I doubt whether even this is true. But in

any case I think that we find ourselves in these days, those of us who are ordinary citizens, with the sense that we are just as much the victims of mindless powers and super-human forces as any of our ancestors were.

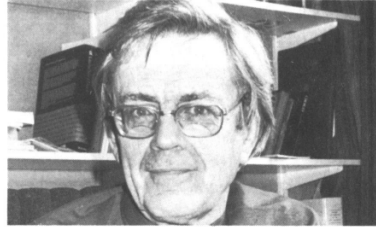
For us ordinary citizens, I suggest that, of all the impersonal powers that appear to govern us today, the most powerful and the most unquestionable power seems to be that thing which is called "the market". If this is true, then it means that "the market" has a mythological as well as a practical character; and this, in turn, means that it calls for a theological response.

I want to stress, at this point, in what follows I am not trying to blame any individual or group. I am wanting to describe how this thing called "the market" operates in the perception and the imagination of ordinary citizens. I suggest the following images, or perhaps caricatures of economic power, as it makes an impact upon our perceptions.

1. Economic power is a *massive, impersonal power*, affecting the lives and the well-being of millions: it runs by its own rules and its own energies: it is a force whose effects we can observe and whose movements some people are able to claim to predict. Recent events have sharpened this image considerably. The wind hurricane in this country was followed immediately by something very similar in the money-market world. The two processes were reported in ways which made them feel extra-ordinarily similar. In their style and impact, city news and weather news occupy the same kind of space. Weather news is given its own particular slot; city news is given, on the BBC TV, its own very special musical accompaniment. In both cases, we get this sense of being on the receiving end of great forces over which we have no control.
2. But there is a select group of *experts* who can study and claim to predict economic forces, and who try to manipulate them.
3. These experts operate a kind of *private language* which is unintelligible and mystifying to those who are outside the in-group. One of the main motives for the employing of such experts is so that the employing group may outwit its rivals; the motive for the development of this area of knowledge is for the advantage of those who are in and the disadvantage of those who are out.
4. So, usually, the movements and changes caused by economic forces *operate to the dis-*

advantage of those who are already disadvantaged.

5. Further (and this is, perhaps, a rather special point which may not be universally true) economic forces can also be said to have *the power to save us from moral evil*. For instance, some people would claim that the system of apartheid in South Africa is incompatible with the law of the market, and that therefore we can wait for economic forces to make an unjust system obsolete.
6. In spite of this, for most people, the total effect of economic powers is to *make us feel that we are helpless*, that we are victims of an impersonal capricious fate. This is true for individuals, for whom the value of their work is made unreliable by inflation and the



• The Bishop of Shrewsbury

operation of market forces. It is also true for whole nations, especially poor nations who find that they have to repay loans at interest rates which, without any consultation or agreement with them, have risen far above the rate set in the original contract.

In a word, therefore, economic forces have come to occupy the same spiritual space which was once occupied by witchcraft. The six features mentioned above are all characteristic of the world of magic and sorcery, which has been traditionally one of the main targets of the Christian movement.

THE GOSPEL of Matthew commences with an opening story, which sets the scene for the collision between the Kingdom of Heaven and the powers of darkness, manipulation, and magic.

This is the story in which a group of sorcerers find their way to the King of Kings; following the processes of their arcane and secretive science, they reach their destination, and hand over to the Infant Christ the wealth which they have gained from their role and the tools of their trade - the gold and incense and myrrh.³

From the earliest times of Christian preaching,

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this was seen as a story of the recognition, by the powers of manipulation and sorcery, of the presence of the ruler of the universe within the created order.⁴ It is an occasion of handing over, to the rightful Lord of the universe, of all the secretive or occult powers which human beings use to exploit each other. And, however unpleasant we may think these sorcerer-astrologers may have been, we have to admit that they recognised and acknowledged the true Lord of the universe before the professional people of religion and holiness came near him.

So, perhaps, we can expect that the professing Christians may come rather late on the scene in the discovery of the truth. But it also means that those who inherit the Gospel and seek to live by it may have been given tools by which they can recognise the spirit of God at work in the world; and they may also have a responsibility for detect-

ing and exposing ways in which the systems of this world both encourage violence to the truth and also cause damage and hurt to the most disadvantaged of the children of God scattered across the world. This, in any situation, has to be a large part of the responsibility of those who count themselves as members of the Christian movement.

We are calling this lecture "On Creating Wealth". I wish to suggest some questions concerning the meaning of these words. First of all, concerning common understandings of the word "Wealth".

I want to suggest that there are some very important differences between "wealth" and "money". They are, perhaps, expressed most sharply in the remark which I heard on the radio by a political commentator, to the effect that some people living on one of the islands of the Hebrides did not have any fuel costs to pay because they had lots of free

LVT to 'save Appalachia'

SEVENTY-FIVE West Virginian officials and citizen activists have engaged in strategy sessions with 20 of the nation's leading economists to seek solutions for their impoverished state.

"Prospects for Appalachia: From Poverty to Prosperity by 2000" was directed by Dr. Arthur Rybeck and Walter Rybeck, both natives of West Virginia.

The conference was aimed at helping the State resolve its widespread poverty, high jobless rate and lack of government finances for schools and other basic public services.

Joseph W. Powell, President of the W. Va. Labor Federation, Rev. Homer Davis of the Commission on Religion in Appalachia, State Delegate Lyle Sates, Susan Beard of the (United Methodist) Bishop's Task Force for Economic Recovery, Roberta Fowlkes, manager of Telecommunications Dev-

elopment for the C&P Telephone Co., and others painted a picture of a region rich in coal, timber, natural gas, waterways and scenery, with a good and reliable labor force.

Officials described current efforts to revive the economy. Coal and timber spokesmen presented their perspectives of the current situation.

Sein Lin, who directed the Taiwan Land Reform Training Institute, told how constructive land tax policies transformed Taiwan from an equally depressed area to one of the most prosperous nations in several decades.

Steven Cord gave statistics showing how the two-rate property tax reversed the urban decline in 11 Pennsylvania cities, generating much greater construction and

growth than in neighbouring cities that did not adopt this method of down-taxing buildings and up-taxing land values.

John Kelly described how a modified land tax is giving new life to a blighted industrial area of Peoria. He noted that some politicians and development specialists dislike the approach because they cannot take credit for each new project. These good things just happen by themselves once the tax structure is set straight, Kelly said.

Ted Gwartney proposed that West Virginia tap its rich natural resource base with a statewide land value tax earmarked for schools and distributed to local districts on a per pupil basis.

He said this would re-

move disparities between tax-rich and tax-poor districts. And it would release county tax revenue, which are now used overwhelmingly for education, for roads, health care and other vital services.

Among those calling for reduced taxes on production and higher land taxes to overcome the highly concentrated ownership of coal and the present maldistribution of incomes were Missouri State Senator Walt Mueller, Minnesota State Representative John Burger, Prof. Mason Gaffney and Lowell Harriss, President of the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, who also chaired the conference.

George Collins, Director of the Henry George School of New York, suggested that labour and capital, while often perceived as enemies, are natural allies and should address the land question as partners in the march toward prosperity.

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fuel around them in the form of peat. No-one who has ever had to cut and carry peat would accept that peat is "free". There is a great cost in work and energy in getting it. It does not cost anything in money to get; but it is very definitely part of wealth. That is one obvious kind of distinction which has to be made in the mythology concerning wealth.

There is a similar, and more important, misunderstanding when it is assumed that we are talking about the creation of wealth when we are talking about the manufacture of things for sale, and we are not talking about the creation of wealth when we are talking about the formation of human beings. The implication of this is that the creation of "wealth" is something which is mainly done by men, and that the activity of women is largely in the consumption of "wealth". But it does not take much reflection for us to realise that there could be no production of goods unless there is first of all a competent production of people. And, even if we recognise that formal education is in a sense wealth-producing, this is a good deal less important, really, than the people-making which takes place before children get into educational institutions at all.

Another major source of confusion in recent years has been around the mythology of "productivity". We assume that we are creating wealth more efficiently and competently if we have a small number of people directly involved in the processes of the production of goods, and a relatively large number of people sustained by that wealth but not involved in any productive processes at all. The "productivity" of one group of people is gained to some extent at the cost of the non-productivity of others.

A further aspect of the same problem of definition comes when we consider the *real costs* of production, and that of course, affects the total "wealth" which we are creating. What have been the *full costs* of the creation of wealth through the industrial production of goods during the last 150 years in Western Europe, and particularly in Britain? This, as I see it, is a very important question from the point of view of those who come as visitors from the so-called "developing world" to this country; they see the attractive products, in the form of cars and other consumer goods, of our decades of industrialisation. It may be much more difficult for them to realise the human and environmental costs which these attractive products actually represent.

The sums have not yet fully been done. Perhaps it takes the insight of an artist like L.S. Lowry to

identify some of these costs. It is, perhaps, interesting and ironic that he is being recognised as a really significant artist only now when the terrible industrial environment which he portrayed has itself become in some ways part of a national museum-system.

Lastly, there is a pervasive piece of misleading mythology identified by Paul Clifford in *Politics and the Christian Vision*⁵: he questions "the widespread assumption that manufacturing industry is the *only source* for producing wealth, that the service industries are parasites upon it, and that public expenditure is entirely subsidised by it." He goes on to acknowledge that the manufacture of commodities does produce wealth; also, that wealth of this kind is required to enable us to purchase goods from abroad.

But, he points out, "the emphasis upon manufacturing industry as the real source of wealth reflects an excessively materialistic view of human aspirations. We do need food, clothing, shelter and a whole range of manufactured products to sustain a reasonable standard of living, but we need much else besides, and it is by no means obvious that the volume of goods produced sustains those services which may be privately or publicly provided rather than the other way about. The two are intertwined and mutually dependent, supporting one another rather than the one being parasitic on the other. It is just as inaccurate to say that public expenditure on social services is dependent on the profitability of manufacturing industry as to maintain the reverse.... Why, for example, should it be assumed that the manufacture of a car produces wealth, while the completion of a successful surgical operation does not? The latter is likely to be far more important to the patient than his ability to own the latest model which comes off the production line."

The point is, that, without the contribution of educational and medical services there would be no human agents to engage in the industrial processes which are credited with the ability to produce "wealth".

THUS FAR, perhaps all I am doing is playing with words. But I would contend that, in a more adequate defining of "wealth", we could do well to refer to the understanding of wealth which underlies the understanding of the mind of God contained in the Bible; this appears all over the place, but is perhaps most clearly identified in the books of the law in the Old Testament.⁶ Wealth is good; it is God's gracious gift. And the important element in "wealth" was certainly the *land*. In

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addition to this, there was human labour, including the skill of administration and of authority: capital development on the land: animals and equipment for creating produce and products.

If "wealth" consists mainly in these realities, it becomes clear that *money* is something quite different. Money is not itself wealth; it is a means of transmitting wealth or energy from area to area, like the fluid in a hydraulic brake system.⁷ This seems to be the general picture concerning wealth which underlies both Old and New Testaments. Where a person regards money as actual wealth this is condemned as foolishness – an intellectual error – as well as a moral danger.

Such a definition of wealth, of course, makes most sense where the people of the nation themselves have control of the land and of its products. This was, in fact, one of the main purposes of the law of God in Leviticus and Deuteronomy; the law is designed to ensure that the people as a whole have access to the three main sources of power, namely the land, the power of labour, and education. The law is designed to avoid the emergence of one small group of people who control the land and cause the majority of the members of the nation to be landless; it is designed to avoid the emergence of a small number of people controlling the labour of the majority; and it is designed to avoid the emergence of one small minority of people who have all the knowledge while the majority are excluded from access to the knowledge.

The year of Jubilee is a year in which the various disadvantages of the majority in terms of both labour, land and education are overcome regularly, more or less once in each person's lifetime. It is easy to see that this set of laws is concerned with what we would now-a-days call the *distribution* of wealth; but it also relates, equally clearly, to the actual *creation* of wealth. It determines who shall be allowed to be involved in the making of decisions concerning the creation of wealth. It is designed to ensure that members of every family have access to the main sources of wealth, and that they have a stake in the whole wealth produced by land and labour.

It is very important, however, not to get the impression that this is supposed to be a kind of universal law for the human race. It is not provided as that sort of law at all. It is given in a quite specific context. According to the narrative within which this law is embedded, the situation is that God gives the law to a group of people who have very recent experience of slavery and oppression, and who have just been liberated. At every point in

this law, the refrain is "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage; *therefore...*"⁸

In other words, this material is not merely general law; primarily, it is a description of what a *liberated community* will look like, it is an account of the features which are required in a community if it is to remain truly liberated.

A liberated community, therefore, will have the features which these laws describe, concerning land-tenure, concerning the remission of debts, concerning the involvement of everybody in the creation of wealth, and in the sharing of learning and educational advantage. All these elements constitute the totality of what can be called "wealth"; wealth, therefore, is different from money or financial power. The idolatry which worships money for its own sake is not only theologically offensive; it is also an intellectual mistake. It involves a faulty identification of what wealth truly is.

WE CAN properly ask whether the law, in its fullness, was ever kept for any length of time. It does appear that it did work for several generations, and establish itself sufficiently strongly for various reformers and prophets to be able to refer back to it.⁹ At least, it remained a very potent ideal of what the mind and purpose of God was for his people. And it was claimed by Jesus himself, who announced, at the beginning of his ministry, that he was coming to represent and to re-instate the year of the Lord, the Jubilee process.¹⁰

But by the time of Jesus, for several centuries the people had lost control of the land, and were alienated from the basic sources of wealth in at least two ways: the land was dominated by an occupying imperial army which deprived the people of the land of any real citizenship; and in addition, the work on the land and the creation of wealth from the land were dominated by a system of absentee landlords.

This is clearly to be perceived from the parables of Jesus. But Jesus himself, and the apostolic pre-

FOOTNOTES

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| <p>1 John 16, 13</p> <p>2 Quoted in Max Peberdy, <i>Third World Conundrum</i>, (Paternoster Press, 1986), p.38 ff.</p> <p>3 Matthew 2, 1-12</p> <p>4 Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Ephesians, 19.</p> <p>5 Paul R. Clifford, <i>Politics and the Christian Vision</i>, (SCM, 1984), p.81.</p> <p>6 e.g. Leviticus 25, Deut-</p> | <p>eronomy 31, 10-13.</p> <p>7 e.g. 2 Corinthians 8 and 9.</p> <p>8 e.g. Exodus 20, 2: Leviticus 25, 55.</p> <p>9 e.g. Amos 8, 5; Ezekiel 46, 17-18; Isaiah 58, 5-6; 42, 7; 49, 5.</p> <p>10 Luke 4, 16-21.</p> <p>11 e.g. Isaiah 5, 8; 1 Timothy 6, 10; Micah 6, 10-12; James 5, 4-6; Luke 16, 19 ff.</p> |
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achers who continued his movement, maintained very much the same attitudes concerning wealth. In particular, they would find very strange the modern notion that wealth is increased by accumulation. The Old Testament writers and Jesus and the apostolic preachers all perceived that accumulation does not cause wealth, it causes poverty, and it spreads poverty and inequality and injustice.¹¹

This is a very broad summary of the biblical witness, but at least it gives us some starting-points, and some criteria for judging our contemporary scene. Certainly, the whole area of economic power is very complex and very mysterious, and

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development, the owners have expressed their displeasure by allowing the orange trees to die. Dying orange groves are an effective way of blighting a locality.

ORANGES are an illustration of perverted public policy. On the one hand, the system of regulation by quotas holds up the price of crops – but necessitates the burning of surplus stocks. On the other hand, the subsidised price of water results in an expansion of orange groves – which results in a downward pressure on prices.

This is not the economics of the free market, but of state regulation – the western version of the socialist command economy laced with the rhetoric of capitalism!

One of the results is urban sprawl, as residential development is forced to leapfrog the orange groves onto scrubland. Taxpayers then have to subsidise the cost of new roads, pipe in fresh water for the inhabitants, collect and remove household waste... costs that would not be incurred by urbanisation that rested on a rational system of land use.

Prof. Gaffney argues that the one policy that would reincorporate rationality into modern systems of land use is a very heavy tax on the annual rental value of land. That revenue, he believes, would be sufficient to make it possible to reduce those taxes on labour and capital that happen to undermine people's efforts to enjoy a decent life.

The land-value tax would solve many other problems, as well, because it is the economic method of making people pay for the privilege of using natural resources. So there would be no dog-in-the-manger waste of scarce resources – idle sites in prime city locations, for example. And there would be a slowdown in the rate at which water is now being depleted from rivers and reservoirs, to the ultimate benefit of future generations.

But the interests that have the most to lose from a transition to a rational system of taxation and land use will fight hard to preserve their privileges. *And a key plan of their attack will be an appeal to the rights of property, which is why the destruction of the environment will continue until there has been a democratic confrontation over the legitimacy of the rights of land ownership.*

theologians and biblical commentators ought to be extremely cautious about how they make judgments which are properly within the expertise of other people. But then, we could say the same about such a subject as In Vitro fertilization. But the complexity of this subject has not prevented theological and moral commentators from involving themselves seriously in the debate.

It seems to me to be very strange that there is so much sophisticated study concerning the status of the foetus, and relatively little about the meaning and the handling of wealth. Some moral theology seems to be able almost to ignore the great importance which the bible as a whole gives to questions

both of the creation of wealth and the distribution of it. Such questions, we can see, were close to the top of the list of priorities for Jesus; they are also all over the place in the teaching of the Apostles and of the early Fathers of the Church.

There are two other principles which appear in the assumption of the Bible concerning the creation of wealth; the first is that *all citizens will be in one way or another involved in the creation of wealth*. Secondly, the style of Jesus in making judgments about social order is almost always that a social system, or a religious tradition, *must be judged by how well it works for those who have least advantage*.

Against these principles, how do we judge a system such as that which obtains for us at present, in which the institutions considerably protect the decision-makers of society from any real contact with the suicidal environment which unemployment creates around the human spirit? In other words, it ought to be impossible seriously to consider the subject of the creation of wealth without reference to the processes which exclude people from participating in the creation of wealth.

• The concluding extract from the Bishop's speech will appear in the next issue of *Land and Liberty*.