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HUMAN NATURE

Human Nature from a Georgist Perspective

By JAMES DAWSEY*

ABSTRACT. George's view of human nature was also deeply rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Since God's creation was good, so too were humans intended for good—not evil. Through creation, each person was accorded dignity by God and equal status with all other humans, regardless of the accidents of birth. God established people as stewards rather than owners of the world; they were entrusted with the special labor of enacting just and eternal laws that would perpetuate creation itself and dispense God's bounty for all. He intended them to be rational beings, seekers of justice, communitarian and free. By allowing, participating in, and often benefitting from unjust structures regarding land ownership, Christians engaged in theft. It was thus up to George and others in "the movement" to build consensus, to persuade, to become politically involved, and ultimately to inaugurate, practice, and enforce land laws allowing equal opportunity to all.

The Prophet from San Francisco

In a letter so personal that it was only released after Henry George's death, George disclosed to the Rev. Thomas Dawson what drove him to write *Progress and Poverty* (George 1981: 311–312):

Because you are not only my friend, but a priest and a religious, I shall say something that I don't like to speak of—that I never before have told to any one. Once, in daylight, and in a city street, there came to me a thought, a vision, a call—give it what name you please. But every nerve quivered. And there and then I made a vow. Through evil and through good, whatever I have done and whatever I have left undone, to that I have been true. It was that that impelled me to write *Progress and Poverty* and that sustained me when else I should have failed. And when I had finished the

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last page, in the dead of the night, when I was entirely alone, I flung myself on my knees and wept like a child. The rest was in the Master's hands. That is a feeling that has never left me; that is constantly with me. And it has led me up and up. It has made me a better and a purer man. It has been to me a religion, strong and deep.

If of another time, a different place, we might think of Henry George principally as a religious figure rather than political economist or social philosopher.

An opponent to George, once trying to make light of his ideas, satirized him as the "Prophet of San Francisco" (the Duke of Argyll's essay "The Prophet of San Francisco" originally appeared in the *Nineteenth Century* for April, 1884; it is most accessible today as included in its entirety with rebuttal in George 1965). But as if from Balaam's mouth, this attempt to demean and curse captured a remarkable truth: Henry George shared much indeed with the biblical personages of yore. George's childhood was suffused with pious instruction; his homelife in his 30s and 40s was marked by prayer, hymns, and private devotion. As a mature man, his faith in Providence grew to the extent that he fully trusted the continuity of this life into an eternal after. And George's greatest wish for this world was simply that God's plan for justice become concrete. Was George a prophet? In many ways, yes. George's comments to the Rev. Dawson reveal a calling every bit as focused as Isaiah's (Isaiah 6: 1–13), as personal as Jeremiah's (Jeremiah 1: 4–10), as mystifying as Ezekiel's (Ezekiel 1–2), and, in its own way, as compelling as Moses' (Exodus 3–4). "I have observed the misery of my people," God said to Moses, "I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed I know their sufferings" (Exodus 3: 7). Was not the aforesaid vision that George related to his friend, the Rev. Dawson, of the same type?

George (1942: 9–10) penned the following sentiments at the beginning of *Progress and Poverty*: "It is as though an immense wedge were being forced, not underneath society, but through society. Those who are above the point of separation are elevated, but those who are below are crushed down. . . . In the United States it is clear that squalor and misery, and the vices and crimes that spring from them, everywhere increase. . . . It is in the older and richer sections of the

Union that pauperism and distress among the working classes are becoming most painfully apparent. . . . This association of poverty with progress is the great enigma of our times.” And 500 pages later, George’s (1942: 549–552) conclusion was again like Moses’, just for a different time and different place:

Though it may take the language of prayer, it is blasphemy that attributes to the inscrutable decrees of Providence the suffering and brutishness that come of poverty; that turns with folded hands to the All-Father and lays on Him the responsibility for the want and crime of our great cities. . . . We slander the just one. . . . It is not the Almighty, but we who are responsible for the vice and misery that fester amid our civilization. The Creator showers upon us his gifts—more than enough for all.

Can it be that the gifts of the Creator may be thus misappropriated with impunity? . . . Turn to history, and on every page may be read the lesson that such wrong never goes unpunished. . . . May we even say, “After us the deluge!” . . . The struggle that must either revivify, or convulse in ruin, is near at hand, if it be not already begun.

But if, while there is yet time, we turn to Justice and obey her, if we trust Liberty and follow her, the dangers that now threaten must disappear With want destroyed; with greed changed to noble passions; with the fraternity that is born of equality taking the place of jealousy and fear that now array men against each other; with mental power loosed by conditions that give to the humblest comfort and leisure; who shall measure the heights to which our civilization may soar? Words fail the thought! It is the Golden Age. . . . It is the culmination of Christianity—the city of God on earth. . . . It is the reign of the Prince of Peace!

Humans as Creatures Created by God

Given George’s affinity for Moses and the prophets, it is no surprise that his view of human nature was also deeply rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition. “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it,” the Psalmist wrote (Psalms 24: 1), and that was George’s belief. The conviction that God made the world was the cornerstone of one of his most famous addresses, “Thou Shalt Not Steal” (delivered at the Second Public Meeting of the Anti-Poverty Society, in the Academy of Music, New York, May 8, 1887). God created the world and intended its natural bounty for all, was George’s point. To appropriate for a few what God had intended for the benefit of all was nothing less than stealing.

Like everything in nature, people were the works of a powerful creator. Although finite and fallible to be sure, humans were more than simply another element of creation; they were God's supreme product, created in His image. Men and women were children of God, the very apex of God's creation. Thus, to enslave people, to impoverish them, was to deny God's will and to corrupt into mere beasts what God intended as highest in creation (George 1942: 309–310). And as for evolutionary forces? Civilizations, he argued, did not evolve forward because a process of natural selection improved and elevated certain human powers of knowledge and skill, but advanced as men and women comported themselves to the eternal plan for justice laid down by the creator God (George 1942: 475–552).

George's view of how humans fit into the scheme of creation was grounded in three concepts strongly voiced in Judaism and Christianity. The first concept is simply that since God's creation was good, so too were humans intended for good—not evil. The second affirms the special standing of people in God's creation. Through creation, each person was accorded dignity by God and equal status with all other humans, regardless of the accidents of birth. People, in fact, superseded all other elements of creation. And the third speaks to human responsibility. The high status of humans brought great responsibility, for God established people as stewards rather than owners of the world. God made the world and owned it. People benefitted from it and were entrusted with the special labor of enacting those just and eternal laws that would perpetuate creation itself and dispense God's bounty for all.

A Good Creation

Did George think humans good? Certainly, he considered creation good. Genesis begins with a story in which God Himself affirms after each moment of creation that what He had created was good (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31) and the story culminates with a special blessing for humankind. After creating people in His own image, God entrusted them with all else that He created (Genesis 1: 29–30):

See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.

And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.

And while many in the Christian tradition have grabbed on to the use of the word “dominion” in the King James Version (and like-minded translations) and somewhat twisted the biblical passage to emphasize God’s gift of power to people, George rightly emphasized the goodness of creation. That is, George affirmed everywhere in his writings that God created a good world, intended as a storehouse to benefit all humankind. This was the very starting point of his political economy. Through nature, God provided abundant resources for all, including the animals, in Genesis.

This affirmation of God’s handiwork applied to humans too. Male and female, in the biblical passage, were created in the image of God. They were created on the last day of creation as the culmination of God’s work. And afterwards, God looked upon them and everything else that He had made and said “indeed, it was very good” (Genesis 1: 31).

George emphasized the positive side of human nature. This is illustrated by a wonderful passage in *Progress and Poverty* where George (1970: 178–179) reminds us of what occurs when well-bred men and women joined at a feast. All are anxious that the neighbor savor the occasion; none are greedy; all are generous. And so, the repast provides enjoyment for the whole community. The natural condition for people is not selfishness; not acquisitiveness. Those are corruptions of human nature. Rather, harmony is God’s design for humans—and social harmony is what marks human nature when justice abounds.

This is not to say, however, that George did not see humans as fallen creatures. He did. And it was exactly their fallen state that allowed for the misery that one encounters in the world—but more about that fallen state shortly.

Created in the Image and Likeness of God

As mentioned, George affirmed the great dignity of human beings. But what did it mean to him that people were created in the image and likeness of God?

In the early Church, being created in the image of God connoted humans' abilities to love and to reason. The Christian Fathers held that human love, though imperfect, was a characteristic that came from God. So, too, was rationality: Since created in God's image, the human mind could think like God thought. If thinking correctly, humans reasoned as God reasoned. Understanding God and God's designs were true possibilities. As for the likeness of God, the Church Fathers tended to emphasize people's abilities to develop, learn, prosper. Especially growing in love and growing in wisdom were indications of the likeness of God (Ramsey 1985: ch. 4).

George (1970: 177–178) recaptured the insight of the Fathers perfectly when he discussed how men were inspired.

It is not selfishness that enriches the annals of every people with heroes and saints. . . . Call it religion, patriotism, sympathy, the enthusiasm for humanity, or the love of God—give it what name you will; there is yet a force that overcomes and drives out selfishness; a force that is the electricity of the moral universe; a force beside which all others are weak. . . . He who has not seen it has walked with shut eyes. He who looks may see, as says Plutarch, that “the soul has a principle of kindness in itself, and is born to love, as well as to perceive, think, or remember.”

But George (1970: 180) on his own added important caveats to the old Patristic views. First, George stressed how important psychologically it was for people to work. Humans want to labor. As God was a creator, humans too are artisans who enjoy molding the stuff of God's creation into useful sustenance. Fulfillment comes from work. In *Pacem in Terris* (*Proclaiming Justice and Peace* 1991: 130, paragraphs 18–20), John XXIII acknowledged the human need to work, so expanding traditional human rights to include “the right to work.” Man was not only to be given the right to work, but “also to be allowed the exercise of personal initiative in the work he does.” Second, George emphasized human curiosity. He saw the mind as a wondrous instrument for multiplying the bounty of nature. In that sense, he wrote (George 1970: 180): “Man is the unsatisfied animal. . . . Each step that he takes opens new vistas and kindles new desires. He is the constructive animal; he builds, he improves, he invents. . . . Whatever be the intelligence that breathes through nature, it is in that likeness that man is made.” So, through their backs and minds people provided conti-

nuity to God's activity of creation. And third, again we see the significance George gave to social harmony. Peaceful association allowed people to free up mental power. That the planting and harvesting of some could feed many permitted social improvement of the whole group. Personal and social progress were made possible through cooperation (George 1970: 197).

Eighty-five years after George penned these ideas, we notice this same mixture—(1) that humans were created by God in such a way as to find fulfillment through work and (2) that human work is by nature social and finds its greatest fulfillment in a harmonious society—in the encyclical *Pacem in Terris* where Pope John XXIII established the conditions of work as corollary to human rights. After expanding the commonly accepted notion of human rights to include the right to dignity (or respect) and broadening the concept of liberty to include such as the means necessary for the proper development of life, the ability to choose and pursue professions, and the ability of sharing in the benefits of culture, Pope John XXIII (*Proclaiming Justice and Peace* 1991: 130, paragraph 20) reaffirmed Pope Pius XII's dictum: "Nature imposes work upon man as a duty, and man has the corresponding natural right to demand that the work he does shall provide him with the means of livelihood for himself and his children." But then Pope John XXIII continued (paragraph 21):

As a further consequence of man's nature, he has the right to the private ownership of property, including that of productive goods. This . . . is a right which constitutes so efficacious a means of asserting one's personality and exercising responsibility in every field, and an element of solidity and security for family life, and of greater peace and prosperity for the state.

Similar to George, we see tremendous emphasis on the right of humans to own the fruit of their own labor. And the Pope added a final caveat (paragraph 22): "Finally, it is opportune to point out that the right to own private property entails a social obligation as well." At the end of the section, John XXIII referenced further what he had meant by pointing to an earlier encyclical, *Mater et Magistra* (*Proclaiming Justice and Peace* 1991: 112–113, paragraph 189), that explained that "the resources which God and his goodness and wisdom has implanted in nature are well-nigh inexhaustible, and has at the same time given man the intelligence to discover ways and means of exploiting these

resources for his own advantage and his own livelihood." This statement could have just as easily come from the mouth of George.

Created to be Stewards

According to George, God created a bounteous world. In several writings, he described the world as "a great banquet." Nature provided, in great abundance, more than enough to satisfy all. Even the then much accepted Malthusian doctrine that population would naturally increase until it outstripped subsistence, only to be controlled by sickness and famine, he argued, was not inevitably true. For the argument understated the vastness of God's storehouse and the human ability to multiply that bounty through mental and physical labor (George 1970: ch. 6).

But most problematic, George thought, Malthus' argument hid the fact that the true root of poverty rested with injustice, not with God's creation. "Has the first comer at a banquet," he asked, "the right to turn back all the chairs and claim that none of the other guests shall partake of the food provided, except as they make terms with him?" (George 1970: 161). One person's rights were to be bounded everywhere by the rights of others to participate in God's feast.

There was a tremendous balance to the created order, George believed. God created a storehouse and created humans in such a way that they found fulfillment in labor. Labor increased the produce of the storehouse. Instead of greedy consumers, George visualized people as artisans, helpers of God, in improving the world.

As mentioned, George's thought recaptured for his time Hebrew Scripture's emphasis on man the steward of creation, rather than man the owner of creation. Although for a different century and society, George's view that the land does not belong in perpetuity to the latest one who holds deed to it but to society as a whole echoes the message of the Jubilee laws in Leviticus, the prophet Hosea's attack on Baal worship, and Psalm 24. The world and all of its fruits were created for the benefit of all.

So what are man's and woman's roles to be in God's creation? George agreed with the ancient Hebrews that people should enjoy the world's yield. As the Psalmist wrote,

So God brought his people out with joy,
his chosen ones with singing.
He gave them the lands of the nations,
and they took possession of the wealth of the peoples,
that they might keep his statutes
and observe his laws. (Psalm 105: 43–45)

Enjoying the world, of course, is also a modern sentiment. But George emphasized also a second ingredient determinative among the Hebrews: Enjoyment cannot, should not, be separated from the responsibility to safeguard creation for others in society, present and future generations. As the quoted Psalm makes clear for the Hebrews, the human role includes keeping Justice. And, for George, keeping Justice meant promulgating and following the divine plan that allowed everyone in society fair opportunity to the earth's storehouse. All should be allowed access to the fields where they could labor. Establishing and protecting that opportunity was paramount. To be a steward of creation meant to fight for justice.

How God Intended Humans to Be

So Henry George affirmed that God created a good world, intended for the benefit of all; and that humans were the pinnacle of God's creation. By nature (that is, as God intended) people were not greedy, mean-spirited, selfish creatures. Rather, as George (1970: 178–179) portrayed with his example of a group of well-bred diners: "There is no struggling for food, no attempt on the part of anyone to get more than his neighbour; no attempt to gorge or to carry off. On the contrary, each one is anxious to help his neighbour before he partakes himself; to offer to others the best rather than pick it out for himself." What causes greed, is not human nature, but rather the sinful condition of the world.

How are people the pinnacle of creation? People are different from the lower animals, George (1970: 185) argued, because humans alone exhibit "the capacity to supplement what nature has done" through their own work. He, in fact, called man "the unsatisfied animal" who "has only begun to explore" (George 1970: 180). People are curious beings. Men and women are constructive; they build; they improve;

they invent. Their inclination, their love, is to seek out the mysteries of the universe and produce.

Intended to be Rational Beings

George wrote (1970: 180): “Whatever be the intelligence that breathes through nature, it is in that likeness that man is made.” It is fair to say that George considered the human mind extraordinary. The mind was the instrument by which civilization advances. And it was through unleashing the power of the mind, imagination, where lay hope for a better society (George 1970: 182–183).

Henry George was a great believer in education, but he was an even greater believer in common sense. His clear argumentation and abundant use of everyday illustrations bespeak a person who believed that humans were rational creatures. What could be more down-to-earth than his argument against slavery? Slavery, of course, counteracted God’s will for human freedom and dignity. But slavery also flew in the face of common sense. “Not only is slave labour less productive than free labour,” he wrote, “but the power of masters is likewise wasted in holding and watching their slaves, and is called away from directions in which real improvement lies. . . . In a slave-holding community the upper classes may become luxurious and polished; but never inventive” (George 1970: 199). His argument: slavery not only denied God’s intention of natural equality between people, but it undermined God’s design for progress. His larger point: progress increases or decreases in proportion to the ability of societies to foster cooperation and liberty. What clear argumentation! People’s minds paralleled the mind of their creator. When people thought rationally, they were thinking like God. Thus, rational thought led, with George, to discerning lasting, eternal verities.

Intended to be Seekers of Justice

George held that to be human was to long for justice. To the Hebrew prophets, in particular, justice or *tsedaqah* was that right relationship between the people and God, which only occurs when people are in right relationship with each other (and all of creation). Thus, for

example, Amos chastised those who worshiped with offerings and songs but oppressed the poor. And Hosea claimed that God would prevent the very land from producing its fruits until the people repaired their broken relations with God and each other. There is a sense in which justice equals balance in God's world—that is, creation as intended. A well-known example can be found in Isaiah 11: 4–6, 9:

With righteousness God shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.
The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them. . . .
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.

Henry George tended more to associate justice with a particular type of equality. *To love God means to do justice*, a Hebrew prophet might say. George would have phrased it this way: *To love justice is to seek equality of opportunity to the bounty of nature*. Ultimately to him, justice meant “equal right to the land” (George 1970: 208). Of course, similar to Isaiah and other ancient followers of the Torah, George was convinced that good laws would promote such equal opportunity and were foundational for right relationships. Good laws would promote and restore balance in society and in the environment—that is as much the promise of Leviticus and the Prophets as it is of Henry George. And God gave laws, both natural and revealed, because people needed them. That too was the view of the prophets and of Henry George.

Intended to be Communitarian

Henry George held that people by nature were social. “[Man] does not require to be caught and tamed in order to induce him to live with his

fellows,” George (1970: 197) wrote. “The utter helplessness with which he enters the world, and the long period required for the maturity of his powers, necessitate the family relation. . . . The first societies are families, expanding into tribes, still holding a mutual blood relationship even when they have become great nations claiming a common descent.”

Here we again see George’s strong approbation of the Hebrew scripture, for example, in its accounts of the Creator’s commands to Adam and Eve to “be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1: 28) and to cleave to each other “becoming one flesh” (Genesis 2: 24). George’s affirmation of society echoes God’s favor on the formation of cities, the nation of Israel, and the Christian Church.

Of course, in many ways Christianity is like a large river uniting many currents between not-always-fixed banks. There are approximately 2.2 billion Christians in the world gathered in more than 30,000 different denominations. And a large number of Christians idealize those saints of yesterday and today who have devoted themselves to a solitary existence of prayer and devotion. The *Life of St. Anthony* describing the great desert monk’s private spiritual battle to deny himself the temptations of this world, for example, inspired many of the Christians of the fourth and fifth centuries, including St. Athanasius, St. Jerome, and St. Augustine of Hippo. Even though completely involved in the daily affairs of their day, these great personages longed “to find rest in God” (Augustine 1992: Book 1, chapter 1, paragraph 1). They tended to view the ideal Christian as an alien passing through this world on pilgrimage to an eternal habitation, heaven. To them, the Church provided a foretaste of Heaven. It existed as a fortress amidst a world of sin and chaos.

Needless to say, George’s views had little in common with the anchorite ideal of desert monks or even the cenobite ideal of monasteries. His affinities were with the Social Gospel. George showed himself much more interested in God’s Kingdom coming to earth than in the Christian getting to heaven. To George, community in fact provided the impetus that allowed humans to maximize their humanity. It was society that liberated mental powers. Human minds developed in proportion to peaceful and free association in communities. And in

turn, the liberation of the intellect allowed for social progress (George 1970: 196–197). George considered people to be most human when interacting in community.

And prayer? Obviously the focus of George's prayer life was not escape from this world. One of his famous orations was actually a sermon delivered in the City Hall of Glasgow, Scotland, on Sunday, April 28, 1889. The topic of the sermon was the Lord's Prayer, especially that phrase petitioning "Thy kingdom come!" For George, prayer grew out of and led to involvement in society and commitment to bringing justice to the community in which one lived.

Intended to be Free

Like the Hebrews of antiquity, George held to a linear rather than cyclical view of history. He was no fatalist. And, he did not consider people puppets. In fact, people were endowed with tremendous liberty. He believed that people were created, as the Psalmist writes, "only a little lower than angels" (Psalms 8: 5) and as such retained immense potential to improve, to change for the better, and to set the course of their own future. George believed in progress for his time and in the possibility of even greater progress for a greater number of people in the future.

Three types of freedom found particularly strong affirmation in George's writings. Two have already been mentioned: to most fully become as intended by their Creator, humans required the freedoms to use their minds to full capabilities unhindered from tyranny and to associate themselves in peaceful communities that affirmed the equality of all people (George 1970: 196–197). At stake in these two freedoms lay a third: the unimpeded right to work for sustenance and for those higher enjoyments of body and spirit that actually distinguish human life from mere bestial existence.

What most acutely obstructs man and woman from obtaining the higher enjoyments of life are "the unjust and unequal distribution of wealth," George (1970: 207) argued. The dehumanizing evils were not consequences of progress; neither were they the consequences of natural laws. Rather, the dehumanizing evils came from the unjust restriction of people's desire, ability to do constructive work by the

“monopolization of the natural opportunities that nature freely offers to all.”

So the freedom to work was at the heart of George’s thought. He began his study of the causes of misery in the midst of plenty in *Progress and Poverty* naturally enough with a discussion of wages. Wages result from labor, George pointed out. But before something is produced, before labor can even take place, the worker must have access to raw materials. As the laborer works and the raw materials are transformed, their value is increased. So labor does not produce of itself, from nothing; it starts with God’s bounty and increases the value of that bounty. But what happens if people are denied access to God’s storehouse? Then, they cannot produce (George 1970: 108). Poverty and its accompanying evils increase, George concluded, as workers are denied opportunity to access the gifts of nature intended for all.

With great insight, the editor A. W. Madsen entitled the last chapter (before the conclusion) of his abridged version of *Progress and Poverty* (George 1970) “The Call of Liberty.” For sure enough, George concluded his great work with a paean to an open society where all would be offered fair access to the bounty of God’s storehouse. In such a society there would be no slavery, no legalized theft of a worker’s labor through landlordism. Labor would not “be robbed of its earnings while greed rolls in wealth” (George 1970: 212). Instead, such a free society would be “the culmination of Christianity—The City of God on earth, with its walls of jasper and its gates of pearl! It [would be] the reign of the Prince of Peace!” (George 1970: 213).

The Human Condition

According to traditional Christianity—that is, to theologians and ethicists as diverse as St. Augustine of Hippo (Augustine 1993) and Reinhold Niebuhr (1996) and to the confessional statements of established denominations (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1994: article 1, paragraph 7, section 2: 392; Westminster Confession of Faith 1646)—God’s gift of free choice has allowed also for mistakes, miscues, and rebellion: sin. One of George’s great accomplishments lay in identifying, describing, and offering a solution to a societal consequence of sin. How to explain the enigma that poverty increases

as material progress takes place, he wanted to know? What a seeming contradiction! The greater the magnificence of society, the greater the misery; or, expressed more precisely, the greater the magnificence of some in society, the greater the misery of others—a host of others! (George 1970: 1–8). And then, what to do about that injustice that robbed people of their God-given right to benefit from nature’s storehouse in proportion to their labor? The puzzle he addressed (and his solution, we would submit) not only addressed his times, but to a large extent addresses our own situation—that of a contemporary Western-styled society.

Misery Results from Sin

The Hebrew prophets affirmed that there was a societal price to human wickedness. And typically, Christian theologians too have explained many of society’s miseries in terms of people’s separation from God, a so-called Fall. (There has perhaps been a greater tendency in Christianity to emphasize the individual rather than that corporate character of sin encountered with Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, but Jews and Christians have agreed on the larger point: when humans disobey God unhappiness and suffering follow.) Although created good, the argument goes, humans have fallen away from their own created natures. While sometimes, as with Christian neo-Platonists, the Fall has been understood mostly as ignorance or an almost-innocent distancing, more often the Fall is explained by willful rebellion. All agree that the Fall took place immediately, either with the primordial angels or with the first humans. Usually, the story of Adam and Eve’s desire to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge features in the explanations. And of course, there has been much discussion in Christianity over the cause of Adam and Eve’s rebellion, the true significance of eating the fruit, the method by which the contagion of sin has been passed down to all successive generations.

Now it must be said that while George recognized greed and selfishness as human vices and affirmed the need for external controls on personal impulses, he did not concentrate attention on the corrupt nature of the human heart. Did he hold as the Apostle Paul in Romans 3:23 that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”? Probably,

but one could not attest so from his writings. Certainly, Henry George was no later-day Calvinist out to convert “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” (Jonathan Edwards’ most famous sermon, preached in Enfield Connecticut, July 8, 1741 at the height of the Great Awakening), and personal sinfulness stood miles from the center of his thought.

Most forcefully, in fact, Henry George seems to have held that sinful acts actually arise from the desperate situation in which society places humans. He himself once gave the following example: as a young man, about the time his second child was born, George’s personal situation had become so dire that he despaired. His family was starving. In George’s words (George Jr. 1981: 149):

I walked along the street and made up my mind to get money from the first man whose appearance might indicate that he had it to give. I stopped a man—a stranger—and told him I wanted \$5. He asked what I wanted it for. I told him that my wife was confined and that I had nothing to give her to eat. He gave me the money. If he had not, I think I was desperate enough to have killed him.

The emphasis is clear: with George, it was more as if injustice creates vice than that vice creates injustice. Even the anarchists he held to be principally responding to social conditions (“Open Letter to Pope Leo XIII” in George 1965: 56). What might he have said in private about mass murderers like Idi Amin or Jeffrey Dahmer? Or thieves? Or sadists? Or pedophiles? To what extent would he have explained such sins as socially rooted?

From a theologian’s point of view, we miss the deeper nuances of an Augustine or a Niebuhr that have marked so much of Christian thought about sin and evil. But we should not fault George for what he never set out to do. George purposed not to discuss theology, but to offer insight into and help with the rampant inequalities of contemporary society. His focus was firmly on society, not on what is interior to the hearts of individuals. Surely George realized that many injustices were not the consequences of immediate despair—that vicious acts often follow from men and women born in the best situations. He knew well that mental disorders and buried impulses from deep within the psyche can transform humans into ravenous beasts. And as a confessing Christian, he no doubt would have been

concerned about such feelings as enmity, jealousy, anger, and envy that pop up occasionally from the hidden corners of every human's mind (Galatians 5: 13–26).

Structural Sin

But in spite of George's virtual silence regarding the origins and workings of personal sins, it is clear that he distanced himself from the naive optimism voiced by many in the Social Gospel movement of the late nineteenth century. He saw clearly that such proposals as improved work ethics and habits, better and more universal education, the formation of labor unions, and even the redistribution of land, while desired, provided no final solution to the maldistribution of wealth (George 1970: 116–127). Though he campaigned for public office, George held no illusions, as did the great Adolf von Harnack and other nineteenth-century liberal theologians, that more government, or even greater efficiency in it, might solve the evils of society. So also democracy, which he strongly affirmed, he saw as no panacea. Democracy increased, to be sure, the possibilities for rational discourse and the opportunities for people to exist in peaceful association, so one could expect improvement in democracies over despotic societies (George 1970: 196–197). But justice, he believed, would be possible only when the eternal laws designed by the Creator were effectuated in society.

While on the one hand Henry George had little to add to the theological discussion of personal wrongdoing he, on the other, broke new ground in discussing the structural nature of sin. Injustice did not so much result from dark actions of individuals, as from that human web of laws and customs that subverted God's eternal plan for how all should benefit from nature's storehouse. Good people, intending to do good, mistakenly acted sinfully, he thought, when they subscribed to common views of private ownership of land. "In permitting the monopolization of the natural opportunities that nature freely offers to all," he wrote, "we have ignored the fundamental law of justice" (George 1970: 207). Even Pope Leo XIII had fallen victim to wrong-headed arguments about the private ownership of land. Land (the bounty of nature) properly belonged to God and was intended for the

benefit of all. A social structure, George insisted, that allowed what God had intended for all to be usurped by a few could not be just. In theological terms, in fact, it was demonic (“Open Letter to Pope Leo XIII” in George 1965).

Here, George’s understanding of sin was actually quite sophisticated and anticipated much of the thrust of the Liberation Theology that arose a hundred years later in Latin America (Gutiérrez 1973). George (1970: 211) saw clearly the limitations of charity. Charity and works of mercy, while not to be disparaged, also did not bring justice. It was not enough to press for more just wages for laborers. And it was naive to think, as apparently did Pope Leo XIII, that these higher wages might be brought forth if workers were simply urged to unite in harmonious associations and if Christian employers and landowners were persuaded to be more charitable in their dealings with those they hired. (The most significant encyclicals of labor have been: *Rerum Novarum*—Pope Leo XIII, 1891; *Quadragesimo Anno*—Pope Pius XI, 1931; *Mater et Magistra*—Pope John XXIII, 1961; *Populorum Progressio*—Pope Paul VI, 1967; *Laborem Exercens*—Pope John Paul II, 1981; and *Centesimus Annus*—Pope John Paul II, 1991.) George’s assessment was stern: In defending the accepted views of private ownership of property, Pope Leo XIII himself unwittingly undermined God’s plan for justice in society.

With George then, sin appeared in more devious guise than as garbed in lists of vices. Good people could be sinful. All were sinful, to some extent. For by allowing, participating in, and often benefitting from unjust structures regarding land ownership, Christians engaged in theft. To take away a person’s God-given right to access nature’s bounty in equal share to all others, or to charge a premium for what was God-ordained access, was tantamount to stealing part of that person’s labor (“Thou Shalt Not Steal,” delivered at the Second Public Meeting of the Anti-Poverty Society, in the Academy of Music, New York, May 8, 1887).

Certainly, many people knowingly rebelled against God’s plan for justice. These were the greedy, corrupt people—deformed, thought George (1970: 46–51), by the fear of want. But these spiritually twisted robber chiefs concerned George much less than did the vast majority of men and women whom he saw as simply misguided. By not being

fully aware of the hidden consequences of society's innocent-looking structures, even the best-intentioned could be misled into terrible consequences. The misguided were not only victims of structural sin; they at the same time were unaware agents of oppression.

Thus, George's need to share the Truth! Knowing the cause by which men and women both innocently suffered misery while at the same time unwittingly authoring it, George could do no other than speak. In this, George acted very much like a later-day Jeremiah or Isaiah.

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!" (Isaiah 6: 8)

After George experienced his initial vision of the great evil that fostered the maldistribution of nature's bounty, he worked tirelessly in writing *Progress and Poverty*. Then for the rest of his life, he labored unflinchingly through countless speaking engagements, writings, and campaigns in spreading the good news that the world could be put right if only society would adopt God's eternal laws giving all equal right to nature's bounty ("Open Letter to Pope Leo XIII" in George 1965). And today, that same work is carried forward determinedly through institutions like the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation and the Henry George Schools devoted to disseminating Georgist education.

Artisans for a New Tomorrow

George was no determinist. He lived in hope. But different from the Apostle Paul of I Corinthians 15, he emphasized not the future life of the resurrection, but this life. In a manner that certainly would have made the earliest Christians uncomfortable, George (1970: 207–213) stressed the human responsibility of bringing forth the Kingdom of God. One could not claim that Jesus was central to his theology. Redemption was not tied to Christ's death on the cross, but to human work.

George was an optimist when it came to the possibility of bringing about a better world. He looked upon himself and those others of like mind as artisans for a new tomorrow. In the mid-1970s, Juan Luis Segundo (1974) produced *A Theology for Artisans of a New Humanity*.

The title suggests both the similarities and differences between Henry George and the Latin American liberationists. Among the similarities, both shared a concern with economic and social structures and both shared a certain optimism that people can use their abilities to bring about a new society. The Latin American liberationists, however, very differently from George, worked within the structures of the Christian church. Their works tend properly to include traditional theological categories such as Christology and to be based on the scriptures and church tradition. George directed the concept of human progress toward economics. He paralleled economic health with spiritual well-being in a way, we must admit, that broke step with Jesus' recognition of the spiritual peril posed by wealth (Mark 10: 17–31). He lessened the necessity of God's grace, of Jesus' redemptive death. As a theologian, on these points George would not have found favor with such champions of orthodoxy as Paul, Augustine, and Karl Barth.

George placed humans center-stage in changing the world. In spite of the great misery experienced by many, George was convinced that social progress was possible, even inevitable—if, that is, we only would do our part in re-establishing those divine, eternal laws God had put in place when creating the universe. If we would do our part, then future generations would enjoy justice as expressed in people's opportunity for a better, more bounteous life. Humans could learn from past mistakes. Society could improve. The path to greater economic fairness, George held, was through right thinking, education, and political action.

What does it mean to be a responsible Christian? George linked Christianity together with citizenship. To be an artisan for a new tomorrow meant to work within those legislative and educational structures already part of democratic societies.

George was no relativist. Absolute truth could be found in the eternal laws established by the Creator that all have fair opportunity to nature's bounty. Social justice would result from understanding, establishing, and following God's design (George 1970: 214–220). Once seeing God's intention, men and women became themselves responsible for building a more just society. People, George might have said, became God's instruments for spreading and effectuating the new reality. It was up to George and others in "the movement" to build

consensus, to persuade, to become politically involved, and ultimately to inaugurate, practice, and enforce land laws allowing equal opportunity to all.

The result would be, George believed, greater justice for his day and the preservation of nature's bounty for future generations. It is not surprising to see Georgists' goals intertwining with those of environmentalists. Although pre-dating the conservationist movement, George's ideas are at their core oriented toward ecology and the fight to create a sustainable planet. Humans were stewards of God's creation, he believed. People were partners with God in restoring the world and caring for the neighbor. George reminds us that God intended His land to provide bounty for all people including those yet unborn.

Humans' Sense of the Religious

Did Henry George consider people to be religious by nature? Not if one means by religious, going to church. And although a person of prayer, neither was meditation essential to who George was. Religion wasn't for him some irreducible feeling (Otto 1950) or sense of absolute submission (Schleiermacher 1996). Neither could religion be boiled down to some holiness code of *don'ts*: "no to gambling," "no to drinking." George was moral, but one does not need to be religious to be moral. He believed in God.

Henry George espoused the religion of the prophets. Perhaps George's most famous lecture was the one he entitled "Moses" (first delivered in San Francisco in June, 1878 and repeated many times in different places). In the speech, George presented Moses as one who initiated a new history. Moses led his people to freedom. Moses was one who understood that the possession of the land by a few, when all must use it, was the real cause of the people's enslavement. Moses saw clearly that land was a gift of the creator for all and that no single individual had the right to monopolize it. And Moses set up the jubilee laws that made land monopoly impossible and labor laws that allowed a day of rest.

Humans are most religious, George thought, when like Moses they are consumed with helping humanity attain a more just existence. Like Moses, religious people should be doers of the Word, not hearers only.

Was Henry George similar to Moses? In many ways, yes!

Again, are people by nature religious? All of us, George thought, long for a better reality. And although hesitant to assume that part of our nature, all of us, like Moses, are also called to be shapers of history. In the image and likeness of God, we are artisans for a new tomorrow.

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