

# Land and Freedom

FORMERLY THE SINGLE TAX REVIEW

VOL. XXXI

JULY—AUGUST, 1931

No. 4

## Comment and Reflection

**N**OTHING is so unpopular these days as communism. Yet it is perhaps well to remember the little group of voluntary communists who followed Christ in Galilee. But more important than the practices of these men in a state of society essentially simple and almost primitive, loomed large the economic principle of equality. They were the standing protestants of the time against the unjust distribution of wealth, the preachers of *a new earth* as well as *a new heaven*.

**T**HEIR economic teachings are seldom referred to, and when they are, are usually misapplied or misunderstood. "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's", though the things they would have rendered unto Caesar were few enough. "The meek shall inherit the earth;" "Sell all that thou hast and give to the poor;" "The poor ye have always with you,"—which certain Christian pastors of the House of Have fatuously take to have meant a justification of a permanent social inequality.

**B**ECAUSE the Galilean's economic creed taught the principle of equality the religion of the Carpenter's son found early acceptance in the most obscure quarters of Rome. The earliest names identified with the spread of Christianity are those who resided in the dwellings of misery, humble hawkers of trifles in localities that must have closely corresponded to the tenement wards of our great cities. Here lived Aquilla and his wife Priscilla in the days when the church was without prelates, when the chief apostles were tramps and vagabonds, human exen along the quays of Rome amid casks and bundles of ill-smelling merchandise who first heard the name of Jesus.

**T**O Asia and Syria, accustomed to subjection, the new doctrine spread like prairie fire. It found a lodgment in Rome largely because the common people of Rome were sunk in poverty and misery. To Roman praetor and Roman patrician the new doctrines were naturally unpopular; a religion that taught the equality of rich and poor was certain to arouse a hatred for its teachers, however blameless their lives, however tolerant their creeds. So government, then as now, the instrument of the oppressors, straightway set the lions upon them, an argument the Christians found it impossible to refute.

**B**UT despite opposition, and because Rome was dying at the core, the new religion made rapid strides. But now comes the tragedy. It was not long before the democracy of Jesus gave way to institutionalism. The religion of Jesus receded as the friends and defenders of privilege sought for the perpetuation of social injustice the alliance of the ermined and sceptered followers of the companion of fishermen.

**I**T was from Rome—geographically the heart of the faith—that Christianity propagated itself through all her conquered provinces. The old vessels of the Roman Empire were filled with the new wine. The channels of the old conquest became the channels of the new. The imperial dream which the Master with a divine gentleness had put aside became the aim and ambition of his later disciples. The dream of the enfranchisement of man was abandoned and on the anvil of the church was forged anew the instruments for the enslavement of the ignorant and poor. Thus was a great experiment in economic democracy wrecked at its beginning. Not even the divine tradition of Jesus was sufficient to keep it alive; the new religion travelled easily from the Manger to the Palace, and lost its claim upon the hearts of men as it tightened its grip upon temporal ambition and grew in power and magnificence.

**L**ET it not be thought that the early doctrine of economic equality wholly died. It lived, even if obscurely, in the teachings of many of the early fathers; it survived among the priests who were closer to the people, and it travelled with the Jesuit missionaries; it found utterance in the practice and injunctions of priestly societies like that of St. Vincent de Paul. But it was overshadowed as time went on by the power and solemn grandeur of brick and stone; ritual, formula and temporal domination. It ruled the hearts of men by means foreign to those of the simple precepts of Christ.

**Y**ET the Church was never more powerful spiritually than when it was weakest materially. It never wielded so great an influence than when it represented the poor and oppressed. That attitude of Christ, and to some degree of the early Church first attracted the multitudes. History may repeat itself if the Church—the Catholic Church, we may be permitted to say, because of its superb organization, and because it need only be true to its early tradi-



tions—might at this moment, when privilege has wrought its worst in the culmination of wide-spread depression and disaster, sound the message of the world's emancipation. How the power of the Church would awaken! Did not Christ say—we are not sure of the quotation—"If I am lifted up I shall draw all men unto me." If a message should emanate from Rome that would sound that inspiring call, then indeed would all men be drawn unto her. Certainly we should not like to have posterity say of the present Pope what Elizabeth Barrett Browning said of another in the bitterness of her disappointment:

"Perchance it is that other eyes may see  
From Casa Guido windows what is done  
Or undone—but whatsoever deeds they be  
Pope Pius will be glorified in none."

Let us hope that such words need never be said of the kindly soul that rules from the Vatican.

IT is a far cry from the subject under consideration to those of present day communism, about which so many of our statesmen have become unduly excited. We think most of their excitement is simulated and in the person of Hamilton Fish a little comical. It is of course quite convenient to have objects for epithets—and the psychology of this is well understood by the demagogue. Abolitionists were called "Negro lovers." Socialists and Communists are "reds." Single Taxers have escaped similar characterization. We ought to rescue communists from opprobrious characterization by members of a government which is willing to share with Al Capone the profits of his racketeering. We are sure that every respecting communist would repudiate communism of that kind! But such facts, in incident and kind, are involved in the whole system of taxation by which privately produced wealth is taken for public revenue in the interests of those who confiscate public values, and this disarms all the harsh criticism applied to "wild-eyed" communists.

OF course there is a half truth in communism. There is a kind of property (so regarded by false conceptions of what is property) known as land values. These are common property because produced in common. This is just as truly a communist possession to be used for common purposes as the production of the individual for individual satisfaction. To the former the phrase "our own" and to the latter "my own" is applicable. To the community should go what is the result of communal enterprise, land value, site value, economic rent, whatever you choose to call it, and to the individual the product of his labor. If communists could realize that this would bring about the equality they hope for and merely dream about, they would be getting somewhere. As it is they are running counter to one of the profoundest instincts of humanity—the right to property that is the result of individual effort. All outside of that is, if you please, communistic in its essence—rightfully public property. But the only

thing really outside of it, and not due to individual effort at all, is the rent of land, which is the price of social service reflecting everything that is done by a cooperating society. And in what has been said earlier of the communism of the followers of Christ it should be remembered that there was a purely voluntary communism, not forcible government communism. Of such communism in a society where production has reached the ultimate minimum, what cost who will say that there may not be room?

THE important news of the quarter is the moratorium in the payment of war debts, the suggestion of President Hoover. It is difficult to see how the carrying out of the proposal can have any general influence upon business. It will enable Germany which is the chief beneficiary, to gain a breathing spell in somewhat lower taxes. But the gain is too small to affect even Germany materially. It is doubtful if it will result in the employment of a single individual man. Economic conditions remaining as they are, trade throttled by tariffs, and taxation growing heavier every hour, matters are not to be remedied by even a fractional indulgence in the payment of debts. Postponement of payment over a period of five or twenty-five years does not cancel the obligations, which are simply put off to some future time. If silly people, like the character Dickens who, when he gave his note for a bill, "thank God that was paid," imagine that a debt is discharged when it is extended, there may be a slight revival of business, for people act that way. But the reckoning comes later.

WE can imagine that at least one effect might be produced by the moratorium, and if so this dismal forecast is somewhat discounted. And that is simply this: that perhaps the conviction may grow that these debts never will be paid and that the great burden may be ultimately lifted from the shoulders of humanity. Such conviction in some degree might aid in the recovery of business but it cannot do much until trade barriers are removed and taxation is shifted from improvement values to social values. That is the crux of the question; not to see it is remain blind to the problem, which is not to be solved by the postponement of debts, but the resort for needed revenue to the sources provided by nature in a world infinitely and potentially rich. But we struggle along with "remedies" of trifling importance, halting, childish and inconsequential, of which this moratorium of a kindly intention but narrow visioned executive is a fine example.

PRESIDENT HOOVER utters dire threats against employers whom he suspects of plotting to cut wages. Let him threaten. So long as there are but nine jobs for ten men, so long will wages be cut. The remedy is to open up a tenth job. Nature has provided plenty of them but Hoover is helping to keep them closed. Does he not know that?