

The Pope and Poland



THE POPE'S visit to Poland in June raised hopes that the Christian church might be able to redirect the development of communist societies.

There is no doubt that, following John Paul II's visit to his homeland, the Vatican regards itself as strongly-placed to assume the leadership of the Polish masses.¹ But what kind of leadership can the people expect? In what ways would their condition be improved if the god-less leaders of the Communist Party were supplanted by the holy man from Rome?

When he visited Latin America in February, the Pope spoke about human dignity in terms which were indeed challenging to the military dictatorships of the continent.

"This dignity is infringed on the individual level when due regard is not had for values such as freedom, the right to profess one's religion, physical and mental integrity, the right to essential goods, to life . . . It is infringed on the social and political level when man cannot exercise his right of participation, or when he is subjected to unjust and unlawful coercion, or submitted to physical and mental torture . . ." declared the Pope.²

All of which sounds revolutionary, but is not. The essential ingredient of the Pope's message is that values expressed in contemporary Western society—with some peripheral amendments, no doubt—are what he advocates. This is revealed in particular on the question of property rights, which determine political liberties and economic well-being.

WHEN he dealt with the question of land ownership, in a speech in Poland, he was confronting the single most important issue for the majority of people on earth, who are peasants.

He referred to the inalienable right of man "to land,"³ by which he meant individual proprietary rights.

That may sound like a statement designed to create a head-on conflict between church and state in a society apparently dedicated to collective ownership of the means of production. If this were so, it would certainly place the Pope in direct opposition to the present regime, and present them with a choice of clear alternatives.

The difficulty with trying to perceive the Pope's views as a challenge to the Communists, however, is that in Poland 80% of the land is in fact privately owned!

The Polish Communist Party, when it assumed power, interpreted Marx's statement that land was not part of the means of production to mean that it was not vital to nationalise all land.⁴

Using the Agrarian Reform Act 1944 to take away the holdings of large landlords, the Communist leaders merely redistributed the land to a larger number of peasants. The result: land was fragmented to uneconomically small units, which proved to be obstacles to the modernisation of the agricultural sector.⁵

The Pope's model of an alternative system, based on a long tradition of defending private property rights in

land—and the dispensation of charity to those consequently forced into penury (through private rather than state sources)—would yield the same kind of results.

THE OFFICIAL line taken by the Catholic Church was authoritatively summarised by Pope Leo XIII in 1881 in his Encyclical letter on *The Condition of Labour*.

Pope Leo noted "the misery and wretchedness which press so heavily at this moment on the large majority of the very poor." And then he launched his attack on the socialist remedy.

For private property in land, he asserted, must be defended. If a person "lives sparingly, saves money, and invests his savings, for greater security, in land, the land in such a case is only his wages in another form; and consequently, a working-man's little estate thus purchased should be as completely at his own disposal as the wages he receives for his labour . . . to say that God has given the earth to the use and enjoyment of the universal human race is not to deny that there can be private property. For God has granted the earth to mankind in general; not in the sense that all without distinction can deal with it as they please, but rather that no part of it has been assigned to any one in particular, and that the limits of private possession have been left to be fixed by man's own industry and the laws of individual peoples . . ."

All of which sounds plausibly

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Will Marxists discover the market?

THE WASTE of natural resources in Russia has been phenomenal. This is not surprising, for land has no value. Well, not for Marxists, anyway. According to the labour theory of value, only those things which have labour time buried in them have value. Raw land, therefore, cannot be objectively valued. Consequently, there has been little check on the way it has been used relative to other factors of production.

There are signs, however, that official thinking may be changing towards what one Russian economist calls the more rational use of land resources.* Academician Khachaturov maintains: "Along with improvement in the planning of land resources, stimulation of economical use is also of considerable significance."

The big breakthrough is buried in this sentence:

"In our opinion, one way of doing this is to set prices for the land." But since he resists the idea that "state property in the USSR, would be put up for sale"—implying the heretical recourse to the market framework—he has to concoct a formula for valuing land according to criteria acceptable to Marxist planners.

Recommendations include the need to compile a land register, and the valuation of individual plots to ensure its "thrifty" use. These are useful advances in ideological thinking, the end result of which will be—later, if not sooner—a recourse to the much-despised market valuations, since even the bureaucratic planners will one day realise that these are the best "stimulation of economical use".

*T. Khachaturov, *The Economy of the Soviet Union Today*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977.

acceptable, so long as everyone can get some land on which to work. But what happens when the land runs out? Pope Leo had the answer:

"Those who do not possess the soil, contribute their labour; so that it may be truly said that all human subsistence is derived either from labour on one's own land, or from some laborious industry which is paid for either in the produce of the land itself or in that which is exchanged for what the land brings forth."

THE SPURIOUS reasoning behind this analysis – this defence of the status quo – was exposed by Henry George in his Open Letter.⁶

He showed how the moral issue of who should control natural resources supplied by God should not be so swiftly resolved. For when a minority monopolise these resources, he noted, they have the power of life or death over the rest: hardly a happy way to provide for the development of human dignity.

George noted that the absence of an appropriate fiscal system – an *ad valorem* tax on all land values, which would secure individual possession of the soil by users but protect the rights of the landless – would prevent many workers from securing the employment which would guarantee for them the standard of living consistent with a civilized society.

The secular state, both in its communist and capitalist variants, has failed to meet the aspirations of all of its citizens.

Henry George's critique, addressed to Rome, fell on stony ground, but it will have to be disinterred from the Vatican's archives if the Catholic Church wishes to provide enlightened leadership, to guide the state away from a socio-economic system which, even today, perpetrates "the misery and wretchedness" of the large majority of the poor people of the world.

REFERENCES

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4. Danuta Jachniak-Ganguly, *Administration and Spatial Planning as Tools of Land Management in Poland*, London: CES, 1978, p. 19.
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Home-grown

HOME-GROWN farmland speculators are OK: foreign speculators need to be treated with suspicion.

That appears to be one of the conclusions reached by Lord Northfield and his colleagues who were asked by the last Labour Government to investigate the scale of land buying by foreigners and the big financial institutions.

The Committee's report¹ concluded that foreigners did not push up the price of agricultural land above levels which it would have reached anyway – averaging £3,860 a hectare in the first three months this year.

But despite this conclusion – and the discovery that foreigners own just over 1% of UK farmland, a good deal of it poor quality land in the Highlands – the Committee recommended that the Government should pass a law which would enable it to regulate such

purchases in the future, if necessary.

This recommendation is in line with a worldwide nationalistic reaction against the increase in purchase of land by Middle Eastern sheikhs, who need to invest their vast petrodollar surpluses.

The US has already passed a law which requires that foreigners should register their purchases of American land. Washington, of course, has conveniently overlooked the fact that American-owned foreign land exceeds the acreage owned by foreigners in North America!

NORTHFIELD, at his Press conference on July 10, noted that land was the "hottest political issue in our society."

I asked him why it was necessary to pass a law which would regulate the sale of UK land to aliens, if the latter were

Nicaragua: policies in conflict

THE ATTEMPT to reconstruct the Nicaraguan economy after the fall of Somoza is bedevilled by a patchwork of conflicting policies designed to please all shades of political opinion.

The single most pressing problem is the supply of food; this is linked to the distribution of land which Somoza and his cronies had formerly monopolized to plunder the wealth of the nation.¹

The ruling junta has now issued a decree which ordains that all natural resources, "including those in the soil, subsoil, atmosphere, continental platform and territorial waters, are the exclusive patrimony of the state."²

NATIONALISATION

Junta-member Alfonso Robelo hastened to explain: "This isn't a law of nationalization." It appears that, despite their left-wing bias, the junta is anxious to assure the middle class that their property rights are to be preserved intact.

So only land formerly owned by Somoza & Co. has been

expropriated, and therefore in theory more accessible to a wider group. But these holdings will not be broken up. Instead, they will be turned into major State-owned complexes.

The new system of land tenure, therefore, is a combination of private monopoly and bureaucratic control, leavened a little with the distribution of some fallow land to a few landless peasants who will be encouraged to organise production on a communal basis following the traditional Indian model.³

Since Somoza's lands will continue to produce cash crops for export – to raise the foreign exchange needed by the government – the living standards of the 2.2m. peasants in the countryside are not likely to improve in the foreseeable future.

¹See *Land & Liberty*, Nov. – Dec. 1978.

²*Wall Street Journal*, 4.9.79.

³A. Guillermoprieto, 'Famine threatens Nicaragua after war', *The Guardian*, 2.8.79.