

Merging politics with religion can bring New Light

JULIEN GROSS (right) believes that Buddhists and Georgists can gain from cross-pollinating their beliefs

IN HIS *Beginning of the Year Guidance*, Daisaku Ikeda – also called “Sensei” (older, wise guide) by his followers – stated: “As Soka Gakkai International president, I am always thinking of how I can create a more solid foundation for Kosen Rofu, as I visualise the future of each country in centuries to come.”

Well, as a Georgist I wish to offer friendly advice from the depths of my heart.

In strict religious terms, Kosen Rofu appears in the Lotus Sutra as a commandment of the Buddha to be accomplished worldwide in the fifth half millennium after his death, with the flow never being allowed to cease. The literal meaning of these two words, interpreted by Nichiren Daishonin (the Buddha of the 13th century), is the Law of Life (“The Mystic Law”), represented by the Dai Gohonzon (the replica of the original personal script of the Law of Life written by Nichiren Daishonin) and expressed in the mantra: “Nam Myo Ho Renge Kyo” (the endless revitalisation of each person).

So what is “the Law”?

On this definition and its implications hinges the validity and future of the Buddhist movement based on the Lotus Sutra. The words sporadically occurring in discourses and meetings between eminent people and Ikeda are Truth and Justice as more prosaic synonyms for Kosen Rofu,

which is going to bring about peace and happiness in the world.

But then “Truth does not hover all alone in the air of abstraction. We must find its physical reality”. Ikeda quoted from his much valued philosopher Karl Jasper. To Henry George, too, truth is in physical reality, the Land and its “Rent”, the wealth created by society from nature. Over the ages, the misappropriation by the few of the source and substance of life on this globe is the original “sin” – the rape of our Mother Earth (to which Ikeda refers in most reverential terms – as our greatest treasure). It steals the ground from the Promised Land of Happiness and makes world peace evanescent.

FURTHERMORE (to quote again Ikeda from *The Environmental Problem and Buddhism*), “greed for wealth, control and power [we would add ‘Land’] contributes to oppression and enslavement and violent, sometimes mortal exploitation”, as well as the arbitrary degradation of the environment. Every war has been fought for land and its wealth.

I am convinced that the vision of Kosen Rofu can only be achieved by purifying the Land – our Mother Earth; this name, we believe is not merely a literary expression but a call for the vindication of its physical

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Russia & rent taxation: ‘We need practical action’

Galina Titova reports from Moscow

A STATE Duma “Round table” discussion on a draft law called “Rental payments in the use of nature” took place on 24 October. Participants included the Plenipotentiary representative of the Federal Government in the Duma, Deputy Minister of Natural Resources Leonid Tropko, Deputy Minister of Energetics Valery Garipov, and representatives of the Ministries including Finances, Economy and Federal Office of Land Cadaster. Chairman was Alexander Belyakov, head of the Duma Committee for Natural Resources.

The event was inspired by several causes, including the serious intention of the Government to find new sources of revenues, and Academician Dmitry Lvov’s letter to President Putin about the importance of solving property problems in the sphere of natural resources and to undertake the tax shift onto rent.

The event should be regarded as a continuation of the discussions of the previous year about the role of rent in public finances. In January and November, 1999, together with Prof. M. Gaffney, Prof. N. Tideman, Michael Hudson, Ted Gwartney, Fred Harrison, Tanya Roskoshnaya and I participated and proposed some important adjustments to the Constitution of Russia. We proposed to prepare a federal law on “Rental Payments in the Use of Nature”. These proposals were included the Recommendations of the Parliamentary Hearings, published and disseminated in the Government.

The draft of the law “Rental payments in the Use of Nature”, which we discussed on 24 October, was prepared by researchers from Irkutsk. The attitude of all participants of the meeting was surprisingly unanimous. The objections started with the definitions, which were a hybrid of visions of planned and market economies, Marxist views and confused personal ideas of the authors. The authors regard the income of enterprises as a source of rental payments. They proposed rigid proportions for sharing revenue between regional and federal budgets (e.g. 60:40 percent), and they proposed other absurd things which would distort the main objectives of rental taxation.

Participants confirmed that though rental payments for the use of nature were included in Russia’s tax system since 1992, they did not yield a significant budget revenue. Methods of estimation of rental payments do not correspond to the philosophy and economics of rent taxation. For example, Deputy Minister of Natural Resources Tropko said that imperfect evaluation of natural resources reduces the budget revenue from profitable deposits 2-3 times, sometimes by as much as five times. Present rental payments are collected in addition to other taxes on labour and capital, which means they contribute to the general tax burden and make the situation of the producers even more difficult.

Practically everybody agreed that rent had an extremely important role to play in public finance. They supported the proposal that reform should be based on the consis-

tent and gradual shift onto single taxes on the use of undersurface and other natural resources. Mr. Tropko emphasised that it is very important from the very beginning to aim to substitute rent for other taxes. For example, in the use of undersurface mineral resources, rent could substitute for both royalties and excise duties. His ministry organised a working group to develop a methodology for collecting rent. This gives us hope. But since 1991 I have participated in many groups of that kind and I have come to the conclusion that attempts to solve the problem without sufficient financial support may not bring positive results.

That is why I asked the representative of the Ministry of Finances to explain what financial resources the ministry allocated for research to develop a normative, legal and methodological mechanism to raise revenue from the rent of natural resources. She did not answer. It seems that the Ministry of Finances is happy with existing – destructive – practices for collecting revenue from natural resources.

The proposed draft law confirms that the initiative and enthusiasm of individuals are of highest importance in attracting attention to the issue of rent as public revenue. The policy should be advanced within the framework of serious research projects backed with sufficient financial support.

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