

PROPERTY RIGHTS

By Councillor Arthur H. Weller, J.P.

In an article in the *Manchester Evening News* of 6th February entitled "Is it Unchristian to Own Property?" Dean Inge discusses this "moral problem" with reference to Christian standards. The value of Christian standards is somewhat discounted by his assumption that no guidance in social problems is available at the fountain-head of Christianity; he says Jesus never thought about economic problems. There is much evidence, however, to the contrary. In the Gospels we find the parable of the labourers in the market-place and the denunciation of those who laid heavy burdens on men's shoulders and devoured widows' houses. But the Dean's view may explain the fact that no clear answer is given in his article to the question he sets out to answer. We are only told that "if the acquisitive instinct is so strong that the servants of Mammon make it difficult or impossible for those who take a more reasonable view of life to live happily and rationally, Christianity cannot be called in to protect the rights of property." Although this is not very clear, it seems to suggest that in some cases at least Christianity can be called in to protect the rights of property. Such vagueness is not surprising in the absence of clear definitions of the "property" which may rightly be owned and of the moral basis of the right to own it. Without these it is impossible to answer the question before us. How can we decide, for example, whether it is un-Christian to save money until we know whether the person concerned is morally entitled to the money he saves? Judged by Christian standards there is a vital difference between saving by one who has earned the money, and saving by another who has stolen it. There is something more fundamental in these distinctions than "a genius for hatred of the rich" which, the Dean says, characterizes Hebrew literature: there is the great moral principle—equally binding on Jew and Gentile—which is contained in the ancient law, "Thou shalt not steal!"

The moral right to own property depends in the first place upon the right of self-ownership. In considering this question we are, of course, only concerned with man's relation to his fellows, not with his relation to his Creator. Every human being naturally belongs to himself; he who belongs to another is a slave and that is unnatural. If the right of self-ownership is admitted, it follows that every man has a natural right and therefore a moral right to own all the material things he produces (wealth) by his own labour and skill. By this simple standard can the moral or Christian right to own property be determined and its limitations fixed. If all men may rightly own all they produce, no man may rightly own that which he has not produced, otherwise some men will be deprived of their equal rights. The moral right to own property cannot therefore apply to human beings or land; the ownership of either involves the denial of the right of some men to own themselves or the fruits of their labour. No matter how strong the acquisitive instinct may be in the "servants of Mammon," its free play will be harmless to others if the moral right to own property is understood and respected. So understood, it is obvious that Christianity can be "called in to protect the rights of property."

When fundamental principles are ignored, economic fallacies are inevitable. Dean Inge says, for example, "If I give £5 to the unemployed I am preventing someone else from earning that £5." Presumably this means that if the Dean gives away £5 instead of spending it, the people who make and sell the commodities or

perform the services which he could have purchased with the money will be unemployed. Is it not obvious that the gift of the money would merely transfer purchasing power from the giver to the receivers? The spending of the £5 by the unemployed would call for no less labour than if the money were spent by the original owner, though different persons might be employed. But while it is true that money enables its possessors to demand goods or services and so give employment, unemployment is not caused by money not being spent. It is the withholding of land, not money, which causes unemployment, and that could not be done if property rights were respected.

With the Dean's concluding remark that the capitalist is not necessarily a robber or parasite few will disagree. That some capitalists do exploit the workers is also generally agreed, but the mere statement of these facts does not explain anything. The question should be asked by those who are concerned to see God's will done on earth: What is wrong with a social system which enables the rich to grind the faces of the poor? The answer to the question is that property rights are violated under legal sanction; the poor suffer because they are deprived of their natural right to employ themselves and to enjoy what they produce. Property rights are simply human rights. Laws and customs concerning property which confer privileges on some members of society and rob others of their property rights are anti-social and anti-Christian; they are a denial of the Brotherhood of men and also, by implication, of the Fatherhood of God. That it is not un-Christian to own property rightly acquired is too obvious to need argument. But that it is a Christian duty to endeavour to remove every man-made obstacle to the full and equal enjoyment of property rights by all the children of men does not seem to be appreciated by Dean Inge.

The fallacies of Protection and the merits of Free Trade were capably stated by Mr George A. Goodwin, C.M.G., in a recent debate at the Penryn Conservative Club. Mr Goodwin spoke as a life-long member of the Conservative Party. However well intentioned, he said, all interferences with the individual right to make and sell useful things tends to create envy and hatred, and if long maintained must result in corruption and bloodshed. This is a true word. Mr Goodwin added that he was not content with freedom to exchange. He made good use of the occasion to point to the obstacles put in the way of production by land monopoly and the present rating system. Mr Goodwin is certainly not making a vain appeal in uttering these views in Conservative circles, for the Conservative Party is honeycombed with men and women as ready as any other citizen to respond to the demand for the free trade that means freedom to produce as well.

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