

Is the Church afraid of a Big Bad Wolf?

THE ATTITUDE of the Church to the private ownership of land is as much a puzzle to me as were the affairs of Soviet Russia to Winston Churchill when he called them "a riddle, wrapped up in a mystery, inside an enigma."

If there is one body of high-minded people who should have a view to express on the way the natural resources of our planet are administered for its inhabitants, it is surely those who aspire to speak for the Creator. Yet pronouncements by the Church on the harsh and unjust systems of land tenure that exist around the world are as rare as pop music concerts in Canterbury Cathedral.

When it comes to debating that shameful process that allowed whole areas of the Earth's surface to be commandeered by a comparative few, to the general detriment and frequent misery of the many, the Church, it seems, prefers to keep a low profile.

This ecclesiastical reticence prompts many questions.

● Does the Church believe that the life-giving resources of the Earth were provided for the special bounty of a chosen few rather than for the equal benefit of all mankind?

● If so, what special attributes earned for the few their superior status?

● How is their primacy over other men justified in the eyes of the Creator?

● Is there a divine right of landowners as, in ages past, there was believed to be a divine right of kings?

It was in the hope of finding some answers to these questions that I recently picked up "Land & Hunger", a booklet¹ issued by the Bread for the World movement, a United States-based church organisation dedicated to fighting world hunger. The booklet is, in fact, the manual for a course of tuition designed to explain to the Movement's helpers "the biblical view of the relationship between land ownership, land use and hunger."

The case-studies used to illustrate the widespread menace of hunger in the world are vignettes of simple human beings trampled under the boots of economic amorality.



by Bert Brookes

There is, for example, the case of Jose Rodriguez who lives in a sugarcane worker settlement in the Dominican Republic. He is pictured in the booklet with his bare-footed, ill-clad family in front of the miserable 12-foot-square concrete box which serves as their home. He works cruelly long hours in the tropical heat, cutting sugarcane for which he earns about \$40 a month during the 7-month harvest. During the other 5 months he is lucky if he earns 53 cents a day clearing and preparing the land.

Jose's employers, Gulf and Western Industries, own 250,000 acres of sugarcane fields and 15,000 acres of luxury tourist complexes. But for landless Jose, the smallest luxury is something he can only dream about. In the hard world of reality, he and his family share three water taps and a few latrines with about a thousand other cane-workers. With not even a fragment of land on which to grow some crops for himself, 90 per cent of his income goes on food, the prices he pays being comparable with those in the USA.

Life for the Rodriguez family is an endless struggle against malnutrition and disease.

Another case-study concerns Abdul Malek, a landless labourer in Bangladesh, a country where 11 per cent of families own 50 per cent of the land. Abdul goes out each day in search of work. If he finds any, he might be able to buy two pounds of rice, but he

will need to eat about a pound of this himself to be strong enough to keep working. So even on a good day, little will remain for his hungry family.

All over the Third World, the booklet shows, the spectre of starvation stalks the landless. The wretched victims are trapped at the very margin of existence, hemmed in by chronic poverty, insecurity and indebtedness.

FROM THE PLIGHT of the landless, the booklet's authors turn to the subject of land tenure. "A land-tenure system", they say, "determines an individual's access to land, water and other agricultural resources. Consequently . . . it is a major factor affecting an individual's ability to earn a living. . . In agrarian societies, land is the primary productive asset, the tangible expression of economic and hence political power . . ."

So the land-tenure system reflects political power. And power, says the booklet, has been the key to "the process whereby some groups of people have gained control of the land while others have become landless or fallen into positions of insecure tenancy."

On the evidence of this booklet, no one can accuse the Bread for the World movement of not understanding the genesis of hunger in the world. But throughout its explanatory pages the reader is struck by the matter-of-factness, the cold, clinical detachment with which the harrowing facts are discussed.

The stone-hearted injustice of the current land-tenure systems, and the way that millions of powerless peasants have become victims of the ruthless, avaricious elements in society, are described in terms more appropriate to discussing the weather or the size of church collection plates.

In the eyes of Bread for the World there was, for example, no robbery of the people when the land was grabbed. It was merely that certain elements had "the ability to acquire resources" through the exercise of power. The criminal difference in the conditions of rich and poor, to which this process usually leads, is interpreted as

"excessive consumption by a few and deprivation for the majority". The appropriation by landowners of the benefits of technological advance is presented as "the benefits of economic development do not reach the poor to enable them to buy basic goods and services."

The philosophy of Bread for the World is, apparently, that the exercise of power to seize land is akin to an earthquake or an erupting volcano: it cannot be stopped; we can only succour the victims.

There is no suggestion in the booklet that the "acquisition of resources" by those holding the reins of power led them into any unethical behaviour. Not a word is said about their exaction of tribute from those they had dispossessed or of reaping where they had not sown. Having established themselves as land-owners they, according to Bread for the World, became "stewards" of the land with responsibility for caring for and preserving "that which had been entrusted" to them.

As the authors put it: "The created people do not own the land, but are entrusted to use it and care for it by the Creator, the owner . . . God's will is for the created people to be good stewards with all that has been entrusted to them."

A GAINST this background, it is small wonder, perhaps, that the remedial measures proposed in the booklet are designed for application in kid gloves with a large spoonful of sugar. Their purpose is not so much to sweep away the basic injustice and release the people from bondage as merely to "change the trends of landlessness".

● First of all, say the authors, there should be land reform or, more precisely, "reforms in land distribution and tenancy conditions." But these "will require a willingness on the part of the powerful and affluent to share the earth's resources with those now dispossessed."

No specific proposals are made, but there is favourable reference to the "successful" land reforms carried out in Japan after World War II and in Taiwan after 1949. On the other hand it is conceded that the reforms in Mexico, from which "a new class of landholder developed", have largely been a failure, while attempts at reform in India and the Philippines were thwarted by the landowners almost before they had started.² (Presumably, the owners did

not have the requisite "willingness to share the earth's resources . . .")

● Secondly, there is the process of improving the "stewardship" of land: "The challenge is to promote change leading to the ethical stewardship of the earth and its resources in all parts of the world."

● And finally, closely linked with the hoped-for improvement in the quality of "stewardship", is prayer. "The Christian hope for social change and the alleviation of hunger in the world is shown to be rooted in the power of God to bring justice in the world."

Whether Jose Rodriguez or Abdul Malek would be much impressed by these suggestions for improving their lot must be extremely doubtful. The great flaw in a physical re-distribution of land is that it can only benefit a fortunate few. The basic injustice to the mass of the people still remains. And in any event, the experience of India and the Philippines, El Salvador and other countries does not inspire confidence in the ability of landowner-dominated governments to carry through such reforms.

Nor does the expressing of pious hopes about so-called stewardship, nor the offering of prayer — sincere though it may be — attack the root of man's inhumanity to man in these troubled areas of the world.

To end the evil system that allowed some men to "own" the land while the rest became trespassers in their own country, requires human action, not pious words.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, if these milk-and-water proposals are representative of those favoured by the Church, then the Church must walk in fear; fear of the forces committed to preserving the present set-up; fear of a "big bad wolf" it lacks the confidence to oppose.

It is certainly clear that, when it comes to the all-pervading injustice of land monopoly, the Church has no stomach for a full-frontal battle. The Church is prepared to fight the good fight but not, apparently, to put right a shameful wrong, only to palliate its worst excesses.

Notes:

1. Land & Hunger — a biblical worldview. Bread for the World Educational Fund, 32 Union Square East, New York.
2. In India, landowners divided their land among their relatives to make it fall below the newly set limit. In the Philippines, where the land reform programme applied only to rice and corn lands, owners planted other crops.

The Power in the Land

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● **MARCOS:** from P.111

Conspiracy theories will continue to abound until the full story is known. One of these could be constructed on the basis of the words uttered by Conrado Estrella, during an interview in the grounds of Harvard University just a few weeks before Aquino left the campus for his fatal journey home.

Mr. Estrella told me: "The land-owners hope that something will happen to Marcos. If it did, they say they will get their land back, but the peasants say that if the landowners try this, there will be bloodshed."

Those words may yet turn out to be the epitaph for Marcos's New Society.

REFERENCES

1. Milagros A. German, 'Land, People and Political Stability through Agrarian Reform: the Philippine experience', paper presented at the Second World Congress on Land Policy, June 1983, Cambridge, Mass.
2. Statistics are drawn from Conrado F. Estrella, 'The Philippine Agrarian reform program: a support mechanism to effective land management', paper presented at the Second World Congress on Land Policy.