

RELIGION AND THE LAND QUESTION: WHY SUCH A BLIND SPOT?

In a speech delivered on the 16th of August, 1967, Martin Luther King, Jr. asked:

Why are there forty million poor people in America? And when you begin to ask that question, you're raising a question about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth. ...You see, my friends, when you deal with this you begin to ask the question, 'Who owns the oil?' You begin to ask the question, 'Who owns the iron ore?' You begin to ask the question, 'Why is it that people have to pay water bills in a world that's two-thirds water?'

Uniquely among contemporary religious leaders, Martin Luther King, Jr. was at least somewhat familiar with the writings of Henry George. In King's final book, *Where Do We Go From Here? Chaos or Community*, he includes a quote from *Progress and Poverty*. Yet, he never came to embrace Henry George's solution to the land question as the necessary solution to poverty.

During the decades of Henry George's active campaigning, a small number of well-known religious figures publicly supported Henry George's principles. There was the Catholic Priest Edward McGlynn in New York City, for one. George also greatly influenced the Bishop of Clonfert and the Rev. Thomas Nulty in Ireland. Nulty wrote in 1880 that *Progress and Poverty* "was the best book ever written on political economy since the 'Wealth of Nations'."

In the early decades of the twentieth century, George's writings found a warm reception because of the work of the Henry George Schools. In New York, the list included Rabbi Michael Aaronsohn, who remained active until his death in 1976. The Rev. W. Wylie Young joined the faculty of the Henry George School in New York in 1942. Three years later he prepared a letter sent to seven thousand Protestant ministers around the United States, introducing them to Henry George's ideas. He followed-up with another letter at the end of 1945 to around 150 ministers who subsequently enrolled in the school's correspondence course, encouraging them to become teachers of Henry George's principles. Around 125 ministers requested copies of the teacher's manual. What then occurred will hopefully be revealed as I continue to research the events of this period.

Most successful of all was the Rev. Archer Torrey, who brought Henry George's ideas to the people of South Korea in 1965, when he established the Jesus Abbey in Taebaek. His influence is all the more incredible because soon after his arrival, Georgist literature

was banned, and nearly all of the copies of the Korean translation of *Progress and Poverty* were destroyed by the military dictatorship. For the next twenty years, Korean Georgists had to maintain a low profile to avoid persecution. In 1988, Rev. Torrey offered a unique insight into the tactics employed by landed interests to capture religious doctrine for their own advantage:

In the Bible, those who had a stake in proving that Moses was out of date – from Omri and Ahab to Ananias and Pilate – all had one thing in common – they were ready to shed blood if they could not silence their opponents any other way. But reducing their opponents to poverty and political helplessness was the preferred technique. It works in most places, but the Jews were so stubborn that it took a lot of bloodshed to silence people and get their land away from them.

Archer Torrey and Wylie Young both died in 2002. Since then no one from any of the religious communities has stepped forward to lift the torch of justice that fell with their passing.

A group of Catholic Georgists organized a trip to the Vatican in 1985 in an attempt to learn what had actually happened when the Vatican received Henry George's response to *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo XIII's encyclical on labor. The Catholic hierarchy paid no attention. In 2007, an exchange of views between Catholic scholars and members of the Georgist community was held at the University of Scranton in Pennsylvania. Unfortunately, these noble efforts achieved nothing of significance.

A paper written by Associate Professor of Law Ajay K. Mehrotra and published in the Winter 2009 issue of the *Loyola University Chicago Law Journal* puts all of this in perspective:

Ethical leaders and Social Gospel ministers were more tentative and tepid in their support of direct and progressive taxation. When church leaders did take a concrete and forceful stand on fiscal reform, they frequently gave their support to populist ideas, such as Henry George's single-tax, that had little practical appeal for elite policymakers.

Perhaps the lesson is that those who study and then preach religious scriptures accept the fact that only a small minority of those who attend regular religious services think very deeply about the meaning of what is being said, particularly when what is being said challenges accepted conventional wisdom about societal arrangements and institutions. 

