

LIBERATION THEOLOGY, HENRY GEORGE & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

By DR. JOSEPH GIACALONE

The Old Testament and Henry George provide a sounder basis for economic development than the liberation theologians with Marxist proclivities, according to James Dawsey, Alumni Professor of Religion at Auburn University. He addressed the topic of "Liberation Theology and Economic Development" at the Fall 1993 edition of St. John's University's Henry George Lecture Series. Citing recent data from around the globe and drawing on his personal experience of having been born and raised in Brazil, Prof. Dawsey provided several timely examples of severe poverty co-existing with economic progress - the ultimate human indignity for Georgists.

Dawsey, who co-authored the book From Wasteland to Promised Land for a Post-Marxist World with Dr. Robert Andelson, sees many similarities between Henry George and Latin American liberationists. First, he notes that both see the source of societal injustice as a structural problem. Second, both believe that people have the power to affect change. Third, he sees the centrality of the land problem as another point that should unite liberation theologians with Georgists. The highly concentrated nature of Latin American land ownership and its devastating consequences on the peasantry and the environment clearly identifies land as the critical structural problem. Dawsey cites 1987 data that shows 80% of Brazil's land is owned by 10% of the landowners, with one percent owning 48% of the cultivable land.

Arguing that the Bible should be read from a contemporary perspective and with a pro-active militancy toward social problems, Dawsey focuses his attention on the Exodus theme and the Old Testament understanding of the ownership of land and its fruits. He explains how Hebrew law understood the distinction between ownership and stewardship - that the land belonged to the Lord and using the land productively was all-important for a just society. That Henry George understood this as well was his great achievement. According to Dawsey, George's land-based economics offers liberation theologians a more

equitable and productive approach to social restructuring than the anti-capitalist Marxist solutions that are frequently espoused.

The Biblical roots of George's economic philosophy are deep and are duly acknowledged in his famous "Moses" speech. Dawsey argues hard for liberation theologians to embrace Georgist principles and to disavow public ownership of the land and other Marxist "remedies." Land value taxation of privately held land is the Georgist embodiment of ancient Judaic land tenure laws for a just society. It is the key to the sustainable economic development and social justice for the poor that the liberationists seek so intensely.

(The writer holds the Henry George Chair at St. John's University in New York. Any one interested in attending future lectures may send their name and address to: Dr. Joseph Giacalone, College of Business Administration, St. John's University, Jamaica, New York 11439. The next Henry George Lecture will be held Wednesday, March 9, 1:25 P.M. at St. John's. Speaker will be Dr. Merton Miller, co-recipient of the 1990 Nobel Prize in Economics. His subject will be "U.S.-Japanese Trade Relations in the Financial Services Industry.")