

## WHAT THE LAND QUESTION MEANS—By F. A. W. Lucas, Q.C.

The land question is really the fundamental question for us all. Until we solve it, which can be done only on principles set out in the Bible, we shall not be able to solve any of our most pressing problems, such as malnutrition, slums, racial fears, unfair segregation, and the spread of Communism and other forms of totalitarianism.

Cardinal Manning wrote: "The land question means hunger, thirst, nakedness, notice to quit, labour spent in vain, the toil of years seized upon, the breaking up of homes, the miseries, sicknesses, deaths of parents, children, wives; the despair and wildness which spring up in the hearts of the poor, when legal force, like a sharp harrow, goes over the most sensitive and vital right of mankind. All this is contained in the land question."

It is surprising that professing Christians, who believe in the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, can support our present land system. It is based on the assumption that at some time or other someone had the right to dispose of the earth to a few favoured persons who thereafter had the right and the power to demand a ransom price from anyone who, in order to be able to live, had to come to them to buy or hire their land. As this ownership conferred the strongest kind of monopoly (Sir Winston Churchill once called it the father of all monopolies), the landowner could compel the landless to pay him a scarcity or famine price or rent for its use. One can hardly conceive of a normal human father who would treat his offspring in that way. How much less a Creator who is Love and who is no respecter of persons!

Our present land system is wholly incompatible with the conception of the brotherhood of man. In the Bible we read: "The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof"; "the earth hath He given to the children of men"; "the land shall not be sold for ever: for the land is mine"; and the all-embracing Golden Rule, "Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them." With none of those precepts can we reconcile our land system which permits one person to hold land to the exclusion of the rest of the community, who are his co-heirs to the Creator's gifts, without his paying to them compensation for the deprivation of their equal rights which his exclusive possession gives him. To-day a person can acquire as much land as he can afford to buy and hold it out of use, despite the need of his fellows to have that land to live on or to use to produce on it the necessities of life or what will be taken in exchange for them. The land and the natural bounties which go with it are God's gifts, but the landowner claims the right to withhold them from us unless we are willing and able to pay him the price he demands for them.

In any civilized state the system of land tenure should give the occupier complete security of possession for all the improvements he makes and the things he produces. Such security can be readily given with exclusive possession of land and at the same time full recognition of the equal rights of everyone to the land. By requiring every landholder to pay to the state for the benefit of the whole of the community the annual or rental value of the land he holds, we should achieve an equal interest for all in it. Under such a system everyone would be able to have all the land he could use without having to buy it, but would not have any inducement to hold any he could not use. He could have exclusive possession under a title as secure as the present freehold title.

Henry George, the author of *Progress and Poverty*,

dealing with this subject, said: "We propose to establish equality between men with relation to the element on which and from which they must live; not by dividing the land up into equal pieces; not by taking land as the formal property of the state and renting it out; not by taking from anyone any land that he now has, but simply so changing our system of taxation as to abolish all taxes now levied upon labour and the products of labour and take by taxation for public purposes that value which attaches to land by reason of the growth of the community."

We have seen that this accords with the concept of the brotherhood of man. It also accords completely with the principles of real justice. Writing in 1881, Dr. Thomas Nulty, Bishop of Meath, said: "There is, moreover, a charm and a peculiar beauty in the clearness with which it (the growth of the value of land) reveals the wisdom and the benevolence of the designs of Providence in the admirable provision He has made for the wants and the necessities of that state of social existence of which He is the author, and in which the very instincts of nature tell us we are to spend our lives. A vast public property, a great national fund, has been placed under the dominion and at the disposal of the nation to supply itself abundantly with resources necessary to liquidate the expenses of its government, the administration of its laws and the education of its youth. . . ." He goes on to point out that "One of the most interesting peculiarities of this property is that its value is never stationary; it is constantly progressive and increasing in a direct ratio to the growth of the population; and the very causes that increase and multiply the demands made on it increase proportionally its ability to meet them."

The value of land, whether used for farming, mining, or urban purposes, as distinct from the value of improvements made on it, is not created by the owner but is made and maintained from day to day by the presence and activities of the community. The value of land, therefore, as a community-created value, should clearly accrue to the community without which it would not exist. If we took for the state that community-created value we should have a revenue sufficient to enable us to abolish existing forms of taxation each of which now hampers trade and raises the cost of living. The freeing of the land for use, which would follow such a step, would release an enormous fund of energy that is now dammed up and frustrated. It would remove the sense of injustice which our present economic system produces and which tends to foster the spread of Communism.

I believe that, had the people who followed Karl Marx and brought about the Russian revolution turned instead to the teachings of Henry George on the land question, totalitarianism as we have experienced it at the hands of Germany and Russia would never have been able to raise its head and those countries would to-day be enjoying real peace and happiness and have pointed out the way for us to achieve them.

The foregoing is taken from an article specially written for the September, 1954, issue of the *South African Catholic Times*. In his introductory paragraph Mr. Lucas wrote: "It is only recently that any widespread appreciation of the importance of the land question has been shown in the Union. The rise of the land barons who, despite the warning of Isaiah "add field to field", has made even the most conservative among our (South African) people realize that there is something wrong."