

The Spirit of Land

Donald MacLeod explores the interface between sin and the crises of globalisation

IDON'T OFTEN hear lectures by distinguished Russians, but the opportunity arose courtesy of Alastair McIntosh of Edinburgh's Centre for Human Ecology.

Dr Dmitry Lvov is a long-time member of the Russian Academy of Sciences and Head of its Department of Economics. He burdened us with few details about himself: just enough to indicate that after a typical upbringing in Stalinist atheism, a chance visit to a local church led to his becoming a Christian.

Dr Lvov's specific theme for the evening was the connection between economics and religion. To most economists there is no such connection. They see economics as an exact science and turn pale at the thought of introducing into their spread-sheets something as irrational as religion. Divine intervention and national religious revivals seldom feature in the calculations of federal banks, corporate boardrooms and officials of HM Treasury.

I am not going to attempt to report Dr Lvov's lecture. What I came away with is not necessarily what I heard and it would be unfair to hold him responsible for any of what follows. He set my ancient brain going and that was a considerable achievement.

WHAT STRUCK me most forcibly is the extent to which the world economy is driven by sin. As has been said often enough, what makes the markets go round is the American refrigerator. These are not just any old refrigerators.

These are bumper, giant, maxi refrigerators designed to minister to gluttony and obesity. Keeping them full is a daunting task and although the US can produce all its own corn, beef and peanuts, corporate America has to subdue and colonise the earth to provide its citizens with the means to stock up with beef burgers, Budweiser's and diet coke.

Which is all bad enough, leaving the globe at the mercy of a nation which no longer eats to live but lives to eat. But what's left of the world economy after the Sudanese and Ethiopians have fed the Americans is little better. Much of the remaining effort goes into the armaments industry. Add the liquor industry, the drugs industry, the entertainments industry, the sex industry and the leisure industry and there's little of economy left for moral principle to rear its unwelcome head.

Distinguished academics write learned papers on economic theory, never challenging the foundations, but merely describing and endorsing a system which deprives half the world of food, shelter, health and peace. Economic theorists are little more than experts on the law of the jungle, loyally explaining the survival of the fittest. It's never said by academics, but the reality is that economic success goes not to the most efficient but to the most aggressive and violent. Western fridges overflow while India's untouchables scramble for grains of rice in the garbage. And all this in a world where Canada, Russia or America could single-handedly feed the whole human race. If half the money invested in pornography and

the salaries of footballers went into creating distribution networks for surplus food no child on earth would die of starvation.

The blame is ours. This week our satellite dishes took £50 million out of the world economy to pay the transfer fee of Real Madrid footballer, Zinedine Zidane (and to buy caviar for Rupert Murdoch). When are we going to stop the madness?

We pursue economic prosperity as if it were an end in itself and as if mere affluence could bring fulfillment. It can't. Years ago, the late Cliff Hanley declared, "The affluent society is the boozy society." It sounds flippant enough, but what it means is that affluence bears the seeds of its own destruction. The affluent society is the obese, alcoholic, stressed-out society. Even worse, it is a society which quenches the spirit. It has no time to look up and no felt need to pray. Everything comes a poor second to the things that money can buy.

BEFORE WE begin to think, "Ah! But the Gael, the Celt, is not like that!" let's pause. For generations we have turned our back on our heritage because when the chips were down economic security was what really mattered. For it, we turned our back on mountain and machair, loch and stream. For it we said goodbye for ever to kith and kin. For it we exchanged our crofts and inshore seas for city slums. For it we deprived our children of all hope of speaking our language. For it we abandoned the faith of

our fathers. We didn't merely move from one town or even one country to another. For the dollar we gave up ourselves.

The temptation for government is to pursue prosperity at the expense of all else. "Provide a stable and growing economy!" they call it. In reality, "Use your strength in the market-place to manipulate the law of the jungle to your own advantage."

Poverty does not bring spirituality. But governments have responsibilities beyond the economic. It is their responsibility to conserve and develop our national heritage: our language, our traditions, our history, our monuments, our religion, our landscape. Without these the nation cannot exist. In a state like Britain, peopled by several nations, government has to preserve the national heritage of each, doing all in its power to ensure that no dominant tribe destroys the culture of the rest.

We are Gaels: citizens of the UK, but a distinct nation within the same. We gladly make our contribution to the common weal, but we wish our distinctiveness to remain, and we are resolved that we shall judge a government not on the size or taste of our mess-of-pottage but on what it does to preserve our heritage. It must protect us not only from every foreign foe but from every insidious force which threatens our landscape and our language.

ICAME AWAY with one other overriding impression. Our most important economic resources owe nothing to human labour and manufacture. The land, the air and the sea are God's gift. They

Continued on following page

The Spirit of Land Reform

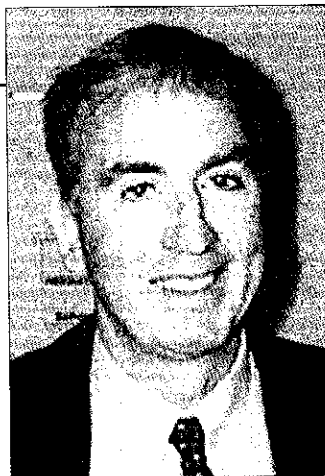
SEVERAL speakers stressed the need to mobilise spirituality as part of a programme of land reform, when they addressed the conference of the International Union for Land Value Taxation in Edinburgh in July.

Dr. Dmitry Lvov, one of Russia's top economists, opened the conference with a survey of global trends in which the majority of the world's population were being impoverished by the economic system. Dr. Lvov took as his case study the way in which the people of Russia had been systematically deprived of their

share of the income from God-given natural resources.

Graham Blount, a Presbyterian Minister and the Parliamentary Officer for the Action of Churches in Scotland (ACTS), told the conference that the economics of land was the central motif of the bible. Dr. Lvov's commentary inspired one of Scotland's leading theologians, the Reverend Donald MacLeod, to reflect on the role played by sin in economic life. Mr. MacLeod is Professor of Systematic Theology at the Free Church of Scotland College, of which he is Director.

Land Taxation & Scotland: the time has come?



■ Calum MacDonald MP



■ Donald Gorrie MSP

WESTERN Isles Labour MP Calum MacDonald greeted delegates to the conference of the International Union for Land Value Taxation in Edinburgh with the news that their theme was politically relevant in Scotland.

"This is the perfect time to be meeting in Scotland, because we are now debating the hugely important issue of land reform. There is a Land Reform Bill in front of the Scottish Parliament, and it is an issue that has been on the agenda for over 100 years. But this is the first time that we have had an opportunity in that century to tackle it in a fundamental way.

"I am no specialist in the subject of land value taxation, but I have a serious interest in land value taxation. Again, you are meeting at an exciting time for those of you who have been pursuing this over many years, because it is now being discussed and it is up for debate; it is on the agenda, placed there by the Green Paper which was

launched in 1999, trying to make sure that LVT was kept on the agenda. I thought there would come a time when there would be the need for having that kind of serious debate.

"There would have been no debate but for devolution, which gave the foothold for the discussion."

He said that something had gone wrong with the founding principles. He noted considerable opposition from people who ought to be the foremost supporters of the proposed land reform. The Law Society of Scotland had described the proposed legislation as "unworkable". Jim Hunter, of the Highlands and Islands Enterprise Board, had described them as potentially counter-productive.

"The time has come to think again, to go back to first principles, and insure that the Scottish Parliament delivers a land reform worthy of the title."

At present the right to roam the countryside was the central issue of the debate. There was, however, the need for "radical reform of ownership".

He appealed for a "convincing political argument" for a change in the pattern of

ownership. People did not find convincing the historical reference to the highland clearances.

Liberal Democrat MSP Donald Gorrie, a member of the Scottish Parliament's finance Committee, told the conference that "we have to capture some Ministers in the Scottish Executive". But he said that a far greater problem than landowners were the civil servants, who were an unmitigated disaster.

On LVT, he said that the Scottish Parliament had complete control over local government finance, "so we can re-invent local government taxation. That is opportunity No.1". He said that local government should reduce its financial dependence on central government. "I am an enthusiast for land value taxation" – which he suggested could be applied locally on an experimental basis. "Most politicians think that LVT is like a black art, alchemy. The rural fraternity think that LVT would hit the farmers, so rural MPs are against it or question it."

He suggested that replacing commercial urban rents with LVT would be a good strategy, because "if you proved that worked, you can tackle the rural and residential sectors".

Spirit of the Land

Continued from previous page

are the birthright of every human being and each human has a right to an equal share.

Centuries of violence, aggression and greed have made a mockery of that. Some are born "heirs" to thousands of acres. Others have no place to lay their heads.

What will our government (our dreadfully cautious government) do to give back to the poor the land, sea and air of which they were deprived at birth? It uses its power to imprison cannabis-users. Will it use that same power to redistribute our natural, God-give resources?

Does modern economic theory have a religious foundation? Of course: Mammon is God!

Is there an alternative? Yes, but you won't like it: "Blessed are the poor."

Sharing the resources of the seas

SCOTLAND'S OFFSHORE resources featured as a major topic at the Edinburgh conference of the International Union for Land Value Taxation in July.

■ **Michael Cunliffe**, Head of the Crown Estate Commissioners for Scotland, described how the revenue from the use and development of the estates natural and land-based assets, such as foreshore leases, are handed to the Treasury to be used for public expenditure. He forecast that the potential value of the Crown Estate's rights over the seabed – for the development of offshore energy generation schemes – would be very significant for Scotland in the future.

■ **Alastair McIntosh**, Fellow of Edinburgh's Centre for Human Ecology, meshed personal recollection, folk story telling and socio-economic theory to

emphasise the importance of radical land reform.

■ **Hugh Allen**, Secretary of the Mallaig & North West Fishermen's Association, said "Community control" of the fisheries was a live political issue for rural and highland areas.

■ **David Thomson**, a marine resources consultant, analysed the increasing concentration of use rights to the fruit of the seas in fewer hands, and emphasised that this was the marine equivalent to the highland land clearances.

■ **Dr. Galina Titova** from St. Petersburg, who is working on the UN Global International Waters Assessment Programme, set out a global strategy for the sustainable use of the earth's marine resources based on the fair distribution of sea-based rental values.