

Henry George, Philadelphia's Evangelist of Social Salvation

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Out of the West in 1878 came "The Prophet of San Francisco,"¹

¹A label of derision bestowed upon Henry George by the Duke of Argyll as the title of an article in *Nineteenth Century* of April 1884. Miriam Allen deFord, in *They Were San Franciscans*, (Caldwell, Idaho, Caxton Printers) 1941, p. 115, comments: "As in many other cases, his disciples took up the jeer and wore it proudly as a decoration. . . . And in the Old Testament sense at least he was more or less of a prophet. The Duke of Argyll spoke better than he knew or intended." It was also used as the title of a book by George's close friend and disciple Louis F. Post, who became a member of Woodrow Wilson's cabinet.

Henry George, to begin a "new crusade" against poverty in the midst of plenty. He carried it forward personally until his death in '97 and his friends and followers have continued it ever since.² Some twenty

²For example the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, dedicated to the promulgation and dissemination of George's works and ideas, as recently as 1961 added to its impressive list of publications a new book, *Taxation's New Frontier: A Businessman's Study of Dignified versus Contemptible Taxation*, by Joseph S. Thompson, and a 1963 brochure of the Henry George School of Social Science describes 21 specific courses that can be taken at the New York center with the added notation that other "special courses" are offered from time to time. Twenty-three other branches are listed, 18 in the U. S. and 8 in other countries. In virtually all branches tuition for all courses is free. Many of George's speeches and other works are available at low cost from the Foundation, some as low as 5c per copy. Both the Foundation and the School are located in the same building at 50 E. 69th St., New York 21, N. Y. The Philadelphia branch of the School is at George's birthplace, 413 S. 10th St.

years earlier, caught in the "panic of '58" that hit the East Coast rather heavily, he had gone out of Philadelphia into the "wilderness" of California in search of his own salvation from poverty.

After trying his hand as a seafarer, gold hunter, adventurer and filibusterer, compositor, newspaper writer, editor, light dabbler in politics as both a speaker and candidate, and inspector of gas meters; and pondering deeply over the paradox of great and apparently increasing poverty amidst great and increasing wealth and power, he, according to his own testimony, suddenly saw the light, sat down and wrote his most important book, *Progress and Poverty*, which became an immediate "best seller" in a number of languages, and dedicated the rest of his life and efforts to carrying the word, by voice and pen, to as much of the world's population as he could.

That George was, in a sense, more of a "preacher" than a teacher or lecturer is apparent in a number of ways. It can be seen in the titles and themes of many of his speeches: "Moses," "The Eighth Commandment," "Thy Kingdom Come," "Thou Shalt Not Steal," "God Wills It," and such.

In the biographies and chronologies, references to addressing groups of preachers are frequently found in all stages of his speaking career. For example in the fall of '84 he answered with a resounding "No!" the question raised in the title of his address: "Is Our Civilization Just to the Working Man?" before the Ninth Episcopal Congress in Detroit.³ In his very brief two-week "recreational" trip to

³ Henry George, Jr., *The Life of Henry George*, (Garden City, N. Y.) Doubleday, Doran and Co., Inc., p. 448. Also in Charles Albro Barker, *Henry George*, (N. Y.) Oxford University Press, 1955, p. 440.

Great Britain in 1888—his fourth visit to that area—the first of the eight audiences he faced was "a gathering of clergymen of the Established Church in Zion College under the auspices of the Guild of St. Matthew."⁴ He spoke to the "ministers union" in Columbus, Ohio,

⁴ George, Jr., *op. cit.*, p. 514.

on his next American tour.⁵ And almost the last thing he did before

⁵ Barker, *op. cit.*, p. 522.

leaving the United States for Australia early in 1890 was to talk to a body of clergymen at the San Francisco Y.M.C.A.⁶

⁶ George, Jr., *op. cit.*, p. 531.

Many of George's lectures were delivered in churches of various denominations, with their pastors presiding, either on Sundays, other religious holidays, or even during the week. On his second tour in '84 his speech at Kilmarnock, Scotland, on Christmas eve was said to be both "appropriate to the night" and "particularly fine."⁷ In

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 450.

speaking of his fifth trip to Great Britain in 1889, Barker, a recent biographer says:

The first ten days in London both surprised and pleased the visitor. . . . Five, or more than half of the first series of speeches were before church meetings. . . . George's very first . . . was in Camberwell Green Chapel. Two days later he lectured in the Congregational Chapel at Wanstead. . . . and very shortly he spoke at Westminster Chapel—which he believed to be the largest Congregational church in London.⁸

⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 528.

Barker also notes that on the Scottish leg of the same tour, "again he stressed the Bible accent," that "a mistake about announcing an address entitled 'Thy Kingdom Come' drew thousands to a hall in Glasgow a week before the actual date," and that when it was given it "was one of George's best speeches," and one that "has been reprinted and distributed from then until now."⁹

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 530. Barker wrote this in 1957. A 1963 brochure of the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation indicates that this lecture is one of an even dozen that can be had at 5c per copy.

In Australia, "during his first stop in Sydney, he appeared several times at such places as Protestant Hall, the Pitt Street Congregational Church, or at a meeting of a Presbyterian conference."¹⁰ And later

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 546.

out in the hinterland of South Australia, far from Sydney, he was impressed both by the beauty of the country and by "the power of a dour Scottish minister who was preaching the single tax there."¹¹

¹¹ *Ibid.*

On other occasions, addressing ordinary groups, receiving honors, responding at testimonial dinners, and such, George's close liaison with men of the cloth was marked. At a Delmonico's banquet honoring him upon his return to New York from abroad in 1882, Henry Ward Beecher was among the half dozen prominent men who spoke.¹² Seven years later, at another dinner in New York giving him a send-off

¹² George, Jr., *op. cit.*, p. 400.

for his Australian tour, "Lyman Abbot, Beecher's successor in Plymouth Church, and other clergymen paid tribute."¹³ Of eleven listed

¹³ Barker, *op. cit.*, p. 542.

as "conspicuous movers" of the Land Reform Union, the group that sponsored George's British tour of '84, three were pastors.¹⁴ The open-

¹⁴ George, Jr., *op. cit.*, p. 422.

ing lecture of the Scottish series at Newsome's Circus, Dundee, on that tour had "Rev. David Macrae, a vigorous no-compensationist . . . in the chair, and three or four other clergymen . . . among those on the platform."¹⁵ And characteristically at the final, huge, outdoor

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 432.

London meeting of that tour, with some seven thousand persons present, along with speeches by a tailor, a shoemaker, a joiner, and George himself, the crowd was addressed by "Rev. Stewart Headlam, Rev. Mr. Hastings," and "Rev. C. Fleming Williams."¹⁶

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 451.

There were heavy religious overtones in the "Anti Poverty Society" that George helped to form in 1887. Its meetings were held on Sunday evenings. It came into being in the wake of a stirring lecture by Rev. Dr. McGlynn, "The Cross of the New Crusade." George's first lecture at the Society's second meeting was titled, "Thou Shalt Not Steal," and is literally, and figuratively, filled with Biblical references and allusions.¹⁷

¹⁷ This is one of the speeches mentioned above as available from the Foundation at 5c. It also appears in Volume VIII of *The Complete Works of Henry George*, which is available at many libraries. There is an analysis of George's materials and organization in "The Invention of Henry George in Selected Speeches in the Years of 1886 and 1890," unpublished Master's thesis, Clyde E. Reeves, Temple University, 1950. A collated text including interpolations of audience reactions gathered from a number of sources is included as an appendix.

The hand of George can be clearly seen in the Society's "single paragraph declaration" of purpose. It gives a good idea of his basic religious viewpoint and of the foundation upon which his system was built:

The time having come for an active warfare against the conditions that, in spite of the advance in the powers of production, condemn so many to degrading poverty, and foster vice, crime, and greed, the Anti-Poverty Society has been

formed. The object of the Society is to spread, by such peaceable and lawful means as may be found most desirable and efficient, a knowledge of the truth that God has made ample provision for the need of all men during their residence upon earth, and that human poverty is the result of the human laws that allow individuals to claim as private property that which the Creator has provided for the use of all.¹⁸

¹⁸ George, Jr., *op. cit.*, p. 491, n. 1.

George's most popular and most frequently requested and repeated lecture was "Moses," one developed on a religious theme and delivered for the first time in June of 1877 before leaving San Francisco.¹⁹

¹⁹ Available at 5c from the Foundation. Also in *Works*, Vol. VII.

In his son's estimation it "must be considered to be in many respects the most finished address he ever gave."²⁰ Barker rates it as the first

²⁰ George, Jr., *op. cit.*, p. 297.

speech in which George demonstrated clearly a strong potential for a "successful future on the rostrum." He says:

. . . combining in one speech the qualities of sermon and oration, George hit at last a vein of emotion that could lift men's hearts. In due time, six years or so, 'Moses' would become a favorite address. We shall find Henry George giving it again and again, a kind of sustaining piece, especially good for Sundays.²¹

²¹ Barker, *op. cit.*, p. 250.

George, then, seems to have carried over into his social salvation crusade much of the strong general religious background in which he was brought up. Of that background deFord says:

The parents were both devout (and in the case of the mother, fanatically devout) Episcopalians; the father was a vestryman at St. Paul's Church. The boy's closest friend was the rector's son, R. Heber Newton, who became widely known in later years as a liberal clergyman . . . But George's maternal grandfather had been a sea captain. The church and the sea contested in his blood. From the former he got his sonorous style and what Broadus Mitchell calls his "doctrinaire quality of mind"; from the latter he got his start in life and his passage to San Francisco.²²

²² deFord, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

George's daughter, Anna deMille, relates that her grandfather, Richard Samuel Henry George, who had gone into the business of publishing books for the Protestant Episcopal Church, was "conservative in religion," that "he began each day with a reading of the Bible to his family," and that "the sabbath was dedicated to austere devotion, and the family attended service morning, afternoon, and frequently evening."²³ She concludes that "regular attendance at church

²³ Anna Angela George deMille, *Henry George: Citizen of the World*, (Chapel Hill, N. C.) Univ. of No. Car. Press, 1950, p. 7.

and daily reading of the Bible gave young Henry an excellent ground-

in the scriptures,"²⁴ a judgment that was supported by an English

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

editor, Henry Rose of the *Hull Express*, in 1891:

The late Mr. John Bright was not more familiar with the Bible and better able to employ its teachings for purposes of argument on public questions than is Mr. George.²⁵

²⁵ *New Political Economy*, (London) 1891, p. 111.

In a 1933 book, *The Philosophy of Henry George*, by George Geiger, we find this comment on George's religious orientation:

The religious spirit was to him always the crusading spirit, and it was as a crusade that he regarded his own efforts. Indeed, to describe George's work as essentially religious is perhaps to bring it more within the realm to which he felt it really belonged. He led the attack upon land monopoly in almost the spirit of a holy war; his economic postulates were the sacraments of a religion that was to make all men brothers and God a father whose ways could now be understood.²⁶

²⁶ (New York) MacMillan, 1933, p. 337.

That George himself believed he had arrived at the stand he took by a sort of religious experience is substantiated by Elwood P. Lawrence who in 1957 did an analysis of George's influence in the British Isles from his own time down to the present. Lawrence says, "In a letter to the Reverend Thomas Dawson of Glenree, Ireland, in 1883, he showed . . . clearly that social reform, as embodied in *Progress and Poverty* was for him a religion, not merely an intellectual concept," that "this attitude explains the fervor with which he preached in Great Britain in the 1880's," and that "in his British crusade, George was in fact a modern Wesley, using, in a social context, the same methods as the great evangelist to arouse in his listeners an awareness of their condition and to lay the foundation of hope."²⁷

²⁷ *Henry George in the British Isles*, (East Lansing, Mich.) Mich. St. Univ. Press, pp. 5-6.

It would seem, then, that George, after a childhood in a deeply religious background in the orthodox sense found himself puzzled by a problem. He went out into the wilderness to ponder and to search for a solution. His "insight" came to him finally in a flash, completely, and never thereafter changed in its essential aspects. He dedicated himself and the rest of his life to promulgating and disseminating the message, and he had confidence that it would find, sooner or later, universal acceptance. He toured about throughout the English-speaking world, and even ventured into the non-English speaking, bearing the torch of "the new crusade." To this extent his evangelical career closely parallels that of the typical evangelical preacher. There are other marked similarities—similarities in structure and in style, in methods and techniques.

The differences, however, are more noteworthy. The salvation preached and promised by the ordinary evangelist is individual and personal. Any benefits that might accrue to society as a whole would come as "fringe benefits," completely incidental to the main issue

of gaining relative personal advantage perhaps in this world, surely in the next one, or if the communicant is among the very lucky, in both. On the other hand the problem that George saw was a social one, not individual, and his solution was necessarily also social in nature. No matter how many individuals might accept it or agree with it on a philosophical or metaphysical level, to do its work of "salvation" it would not only have to be adopted, but acted upon by some "society" as a whole—ideally the whole world, but practically in our present way of controlling life and taxes by some segment of at least national size and scope. The benefits to the individual would come to him as a member of the society, not as a preferred person outside it, and they would be collectable in this world only; none could be reserved for the next. These are significant differences.

Another difference is that the typical evangelical preacher tends to expound a narrow and very particular creed as the only true one to the exclusion of all others, and it generally involves the offices of an intermediary—often a son of the deity, a semi-god, demi-god, or some sanctified human being—between the individual and the "father" or top figure in a hierarchy of deities. With George's solution there was no such limitation, restriction, or exclusion. The only "God" involved in his plan was the very top one, the "almighty" himself, on the one end, and everybody, not just special somebodies on the other.

It is, or was up to about 1886 or 1887, completely conceivable to visualize, as George undoubtedly did, persons of every known religious faith free to accept, and freely accepting, as laws of their own deity, the "natural laws" upon which George based his premises and the conclusions that he drew from them. There need be no conflict whatever between George's social salvation and a person's other personal religion. He could keep both.

Another novel feature of Georgism is that unlike religion in the ordinary sense in which rejection necessitates eternal condemnation, even rejection would not disqualify one from the benefits. The "blasphemer" might say as Harold Cox did:

Nor will Mr. George's principle itself hold water. It is based on the assertion of the existence of some natural law of right and wrong which overrides laws established by opinion or authority. No such law exists. Metaphysicians and theologians may argue about what they are pleased to call "natural" law till words fail them, but until their "natural" law has been adopted by public opinion, or embodied in a judicial decision, or set down in a statute, it is no law, but only somebody's opinion of what ought to be law.²⁸

²⁸ *Land Nationalization and Land Taxation*, (London) Methuen and Co., 1906, p. 120.

Instead of responding, "Be ye, then, eternally damned," George would more likely have said, "Your denying those laws of your Creator does not expunge them, sir, and you are entitled to benefit by them as much as anyone else just as soon as we can get them implemented

in practice.” Hence even the skeptics, agnostics, and even the atheists would be in no wise cast out.

It is, of course, ironic that George’s “religion,” if that indeed it was, being broader, more tolerant, and more benevolent than any of the others, and one that did manage right around the New York City election of 1886 to bring together into one big, brief, but happy coalition Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, agnostic, and atheistic, Republicans, Democrats, Socialists, and Labor Party men, should have in just a little while fallen apart so completely, with Dr. McGlynn, George’s friend and active supporter in the Anti-Poverty Society silenced and excommunicated by the Roman Church, the votes of the members of his and other congregations allegedly “spirited away” at the crucial last moment,²⁹ the American Socialists challenging and meeting him in

²⁹ Barker quotes Poultney Bigelow as saying that George’s “noisy Land League supporters howled themselves red in the face until the Sunday before election day, and then from every pulpit came a soft whisper more potent on the Tuesday after than Moses on Mount Sinai.” — *op. cit.*, p. 479.

public debate in his next campaign, the British Socialists withdrawing their support and proceeding on their own way, and the American Labor Organizations also drawing apart.

What can we say “finally” then about Philadelphia’s evangelist of social reform? Probably not a whole lot that would not be highly controversial. We can, no doubt, agree with deFord that:

This bald little man with the bright blue eyes, the full reddish beard, and the unexplained “English accent,” was one of the very few world influences whom America has so far produced.³⁰

³⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 135.

Numbers of copies of books printed and sold, their geographical spread, George’s speaking itinerary, newspaper accounts of the numbers of persons who heard him and of their reactions, testimony of influence upon persons of extraordinary prominence from his day to this—a list that reads like *Who’s Who*—such things as these would certainly support that judgment. We may accept as probably true George Bernard Shaw’s observation that it was a chance hearing of George that resulted in his being enlisted “forever after” as a soldier in the Liberative War of Humanity” and that he found that “five-sixths of those who were swept into the great Socialist revival of 1883” with him “had been converted by Henry George.”³¹ They were con-

³¹ From a letter from Shaw to Hamlin Garland, quoted in Barker, *op. cit.*, p. 376.

verted by George, but not to Georgism—except as a partial answer, as a step in the right direction. In the opinion of R. C. K. Ensor, “‘Out of Henry George by either Bellamy or Gronlund’ was a true pedigree of the convictions held by nearly all the leading propagandists who set Socialism on its feet between 1886 and 1900.”³²

³² Quoted in Lawrence, *op. cit.*, p. 75. Bellamy is best known for *Looking Backward*, 1887; Gronlund for *Cooperative Commonwealth*, 1884.

There can be little doubt that George sincerely believed he had found, by a kind of divine inspiration, the E=MC² of political econ-

omy, the simple, comprehensible formula that explains and points the way for the solution of the enigma of great want in the midst of great wealth. It might turn out that his critics and opponents are right who say there is no simple, understandable formula, that political economy is necessarily infinitely and grotesquely complex and impenetrable—so much so that even the “experts” cannot begin to see through it and find a solution to George’s enigma, but must necessarily keep coming up with more and more, longer and longer, trickier and trickier tax bills coupled with more and more inadequate services, and pyramiding deficits *ad infinitum*. If they are right we would seem to have a long, bleak, and not very attractive row to hoe ahead of us.

It might be that those other somewhat more optimistic people are right who say there may be a simple, comprehensible formula to solve the enigma, but George’s was not it, that it will be discovered, when and if it is, by methodical inductive observation and analysis and will not be graven upon a rock by a bolt of lightning. If they are right, let us hope they hurry and get on with it.

There is of course one more possibility if we want to round them out—the outside chance that perhaps George was right after all. There are a number of sincere, serious people around who believe strongly enough that he was to be doing missionary work for his cause sixty-six years after his death. They have been denied, but they feel that they have never been adequately disproved. At least nobody else has as yet provided a more satisfactory solution for George’s enigma. His crusade may not be over yet.