

Monday, January 7, 1953

LETTERS FROM THE PEOPLE

Thomas vs. Sheen

To the Editor of the Post-Dispatch

Your issue of Dec. 12 contains an article by Bishop Fulton J. Sheen on "Capitalism and Socialism." The bishop, more than some editors or clergymen, recognizes that capitalism has faults. He, however, makes certain assertions about Socialism which definitely are not true of democratic socialism which he doesn't properly distinguish from Communism. Thus the bishop writes that Socialism says that if religion has nothing to say then it should not be permitted to exist. Thus the amoral attitude of capitalism becomes the anti-moral attitude of Socialism."

Nowhere that democratic socialism has come to power—for example, in Great Britain, New Zealand, Australia, Saskatchewan, or the Scandinavian countries—has it said that religion should not be permitted to exist. It has stood in the Jeffersonian tradition for separation of church and state.

I am interested and inclined to be sympathetic with the bishop's idea that "the secret of escaping from the power of others is to diffuse private ownership as widely as possible." But if this is to make sense, we have to distinguish what kinds of property can be privately owned and how.

What possible arrangement is there under which private ownership can be extended to the mineral wealth, coal, oil, etc., which God gave us all, on any fair terms? Is not public ownership necessary? By what ethical right is ownership of land to be justified except in terms of occupancy and use?

Which would seem to require action by the state to prevent landlordism. Like Henry George, I distinguish between land and improvements to land, and think a social system might make use of the principle of taxing the economic rental value of land.

How could the diffusion of private ownership deal with money and credit? Or with public utilities and such basic industries as steel? Merely a multiplication of stockholders is not the answer as long as the operators of the industry would have such power over all of us. How could the extension of private ownership deal with the questions raised by the Missouri Valley which sorely needs a TVA?

Not merely for the prevention of devastating floods. Bishop Sheen forgets that American Socialists have insisted for years that when industry is socialized, the model for controlling it should be the TVA, rather than the Post Office Department, with this important difference: There should be direct representation of all consumers and of the workers in the industry on the governing board.

I am a champion of labor unions and their necessity even in a Socialist society. Nevertheless I do not think the problem of the railroads would be solved on the bishop's principle of labor's organizing "to get itself more and more into it (industry) so that it will have some capital to defend," not when I consider the record of the railroad brotherhoods and their attitude toward colored workers.

NORMAN THOMAS.  
New York City.