

RELIGION IN A SOCIETY FREE OF LANDLORDS

IN ASKING what the church would look and sound like in what Georgists call a Single-Tax Society, we have to distinguish between whether we are talking about all the world doing away with rent-appropriation, or just one country. If we are talking about England, the situation would not be the same as if we were talking about the United States of America or the Third World. The Rev. ARCHER TORREY of Jesus Abbey, South Korea, reflects on the religious character of a Single-Tax Society

THE CHURCH of England and other state churches (e.g. Scandinavia) own huge tracts of land and are tax exempt. The income supports ancient structures which the present membership are either unable or unwilling to finance, as well as supporting clergy for poverty-stricken areas.

In a Single-Tax society, the individual church members would be far less poverty-stricken and would, at least, be able to support their clergy. In addition, the church should be prosperous enough to take back its responsibility for education, medical care, old age care, and the like, and unload the State of these burdens

which the State does very badly at tremendous waste of funds. The ideas that humanism or the pursuit of pleasure are the primary motivations in life could be countered with the Christian teaching that human beings are here to serve one another as well as God.

How the church would maintain its ancient land-marks and architectural works of art is an interesting question. Perhaps the state would be willing and able to accept most of these as National Treasures and provide for their upkeep, while the clergy would be supported by the congregations meeting there.

With no landlords to suppress

theological discourse, the church people (beginning with the theologians) could be properly informed and adopt new attitudes based on the Bible, as exegeted by Henry George! How long it would take the theologians to admit that they had been wrong all along, is hard to guess. The rank and file would respond instantly, as they did in Henry George's time before the debate was stifled.

With this new understanding, such movements as the "Back Home" movement, to return to the countryside and enjoy a more meaningful life working the land and living "close to creation" would, possibly, create a labour shortage for the factories. On the other hand, many industries that are now engaged in producing worthless luxuries or even evil items could quietly go out of business. The capital involved could be deployed elsewhere. With this return to the rural there would also be a new and balanced concern for ecology as well as for rural crafts and arts.

LOOKING AT the broader picture, it is a fact that the Christian church,

oil rent

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author's Conclusions, where we learn that Sheikh Zayed can be credited with "a massive distribution of 'world territorial rent'," and more specifically that in "the peak year of 1974, when the price of oil had reached its zenith, Abu Dhabi contributed approximately 28% of its income to foreign aid."

There are few conclusions but there are critical questions. They

include the possibility ("not improbable," Andelson warns) "that the demand for Abu Dhabi oil might plummet drastically" for various reasons, two of which he raises in particular. What then?

This working paper has whetted my appetite for a better understanding of what must be a man of strong vision.

today, is badly divided.

Theologically speaking, there is only one church, it is the Body of Christ, and the various sub-divisions are members of the body which should supplement one another and function together as a harmonious whole without losing autonomy. There is a move back in this direction after 1600 years. With the landlords removed from the governing boards of theological colleges and denominations, this movement of mutual cooperation would be much accelerated.

But today there are three main groupings. First, there are the large, longstanding, highly organized denominations and "Churches". There are also smaller groupings, antithetical to the main-line denominations, trying to be closer to the New Testament concepts (some of these are of several centuries' history and many are recent organisations). There are also "para-church" groups with various special concerns, acting independently, not opposed to the main-line churches, but working more or less in parallel with them. The struggle for economic justice is largely limited to these small groups, although there are varying degrees of concern and varying forms of activity on behalf of social justice in the second group.

The mainline denominations are dominated by the landlord class. They give lip-service to the cause of social justice, but offer no programs that would in any way be a threat to the ruling class.

Because of the worldwide prevalence of economic inequality due to the landlord system, there are also groups of poverty-stricken churches, some of which are attached to the mainline denominations and dependent upon them for meagre financial assistance. Others are independent and have varying degrees of "koinonia" (mutual support and responsibility). In proportion as the koinonia is strong the mutual support means that none of their people are destitute or demoralised. Some of

these churches are very healthy, but being on the fringe of the world church, as a whole, they suffer from isolation in varying degrees, and are unable to draw from the reservoirs of spiritual strength that do exist even in the most corrupt old-line denominations.

Although some denominations point to others as being corrupt beyond redemption, this attitude is non-Biblical. The Bible clearly teaches, in many passages, that we are not to pass such final judgments on one another but to await the denouement of history, at the return of Christ to the planet.

AS LONG AS the landlord system exists in any country, it will either attempt to repress the Christian church or to corrupt it. If the struggle for the removal of rent-appropriation is successful, there will be no more landlords to try to control the church. The rank-and-file members will begin to have much more real say in the management and general atmosphere of the church. That does not mean, however, that people who love organisation, power, prestige, money and other such things will cease to exist. Just as the bureaucrats have continued in power after the "collapse of communism", so the church bureaucrats would try to continue in power after the collapse of landlordism! However, such people will lose their most powerful support and a process of cleansing will be easier to carry out.

With the major source of greed removed, cooperation between church groupings will become easier and there will be more cross-fertilisation of ideas. With the rent-appropriation problem solved, of course, society itself will change considerably. There will be very little unemployment and Christians can change from thinking in terms of "finding work" to "vocation" (what has God called me to do?).

There are already many Christians who take Jesus' teaching in Matt. 6.33 seriously: "Take no thought what you

will eat or what you will drink or what you will wear. You work for God's rule and his justice and all these things will be added to you." In a society where there is almost no unemployment, however, there is no guarantee that more people will heed Jesus' words! To see a good example, look at Taiwan.

The desperate struggle to find work has been replaced in this land-tax society by greed for more money! Gambling is rife, not to mention scheming and manipulation in business and politics! Hong Kong is another example. A recent series of interviews with Hong Kong residents with regard to their attitude towards the 1997 changeover revealed that their only concern was whether they could get (or stay) rich under China!

The church will still have to exhort its members not to make money a goal. Jesus said, "Do not save up money on earth, where moth and rust destroy things, but put your savings in heaven. Where your savings are that is where your heart will be, too." What would this mean, in practical terms, in a just society?

First, it should be understood that the Biblical picture of economics is connected with a very different picture of politics from today. The Bible does not advocate a highly centralised government administration, but assumes local government based on volunteer leadership. After the rise of the Kingdom (400 years following the first implementation of the Jubilee and sabbatical year system) the prophets acceded to the demand for a strong central government and laid down certain conditions, but they never actually advocated strong central government. A Biblical society would not waste much money on Big Government and would not abdicate responsibility to government.

With the economic prosperity that the churches will enjoy in a Single-Tax society, it will become possible for the churches to undertake many forms of activity that are now relatively limited. They will be able to

provide complete educational systems for all their children, and save them from the corruption of a prosperous, but pagan, humanistic society. They will be able to make provision for widows and orphans and handicapped people far more effectively, not just at the material level, but also at the psychological and spiritual levels.

"They will be able," I say. I do not guarantee that they will! Many big churches are loaded with money and do almost nothing of this sort, even now. For such attitudes to change there will have to be more than just the removal of poverty; there will have to be spiritual rebirth.

With the landlord element removed, however, the struggle for decentralisation could take on new momentum. Voluntary cooperation can replace the burdensome bureaucratic structures of many denominations. The churches should be able to "put their treasure in heaven" by going all out for missions and the evangelisation of the world, and working for justice (read "LVT") as well as engaging vigorously in the struggle against humanistic materialism in their own home countries.

THERE IS a difference between countries like the United States, where churches usually own their own land and buildings and are maintained at both the material and the personnel level by current giving from the local congregations, and those countries that have ancient state churches.

State churches and, of course, the Roman Catholic Church, own huge tracts of land and are tax-exempt. Whether they would want to give up centuries' long habits of depending on others is a psychological and spiritual problem, not an economic one.

We see the effects of paternalism in the former communist countries. It takes one or two generations to grow out of it. The same would possibly be true for the churches, except that they do have a spiritual dimension which the ex-communist countries do not have. The process might move faster.

If there were a "revival" movement at the same time, sweeping changes could take place almost overnight. But prosperity does not guarantee revival. The Book of Revelations describes the one really prosperous church in Asia, the Church of Laodicea, as spiritually blind, poverty-stricken and naked!

Since it is highly likely that a Single-Tax society would see large numbers of people returning to a rural life, there would be a seeming problem of urban churches losing members. This should not be a real problem, as there are still vast numbers of the urban population who never darken the door of a church and these churches would have rich opportunities to reach out to the remaining urban people. In some countries only 2% of the church members are actually in attendance at services on any given Sunday! This is due to a strong feeling that the church is irrelevant.

This brings us back to the question of whether being in a Single-Tax society would produce any changes in theological emphasis. Would the church be more relevant? At present, those churches in countries that display strong elements of the Single-Tax, such as Taiwan and Hong Kong, are still dominated by the theology of the mother churches which have adapted to the landlord society. They are not even aware of the source of the prosperity in their respective countries. The conspiracy of silence with regard to the Single-Tax has affected theologians as well as economists.

Once the pressure to keep silence was removed, books on economic justice could begin to be published and the churches in the Land Tax countries could have a new understanding of the problems of the people in landlord-dominated countries. The emphasis of missions would begin to take on an added dimension which has, until now, been almost totally missing.

We have to distinguish between the different strains of theology. The "liberal" theologians have, for years, emphasised social justice but have

been almost entirely unaware of the Single Tax solution. They supported Henry George in the 19th Century, and then dropped him and went for Marxism. The first book linking "liberation theology" to Henry George only came out after the "collapse of communism". It was published by a secular publisher and has had relatively little space in theological reviews.

The "evangelicals" have traditionally ignored social problems in favour of "spiritual" issues but, under pressure from Third World Christians this attitude is already beginning to change. As for "Pentecostals" and "Charismatics", in the Third World countries, they have been deeply involved in social issues, but unaware of the Biblical solution (found in Georgism) and have generally failed to find workable answers. They have often allied themselves with Marxist guerrilla movements, as have many of the rank-and-file Roman Catholic clergy. Their sister churches in first-world countries, though often composed also of the poorer elements in society, have suffered from the blindness caused by the suppression of Biblical economics by the landlords.

The "Catholic" tradition ("High Church" Anglican, Roman, Russian, Greek Orthodox, etc. churches) have a long history of making noises about social justice and, in many cases, fighting for it, but always with the wrong tools. In this century, they have frequently compromised with Marxism. The Roman Catholic church is a world church and is not likely to take a stand against landlordism until every Catholic country has completed its land reforms apart from the church. After that, the Back to the Bible movement can begin to take hold. The Church has never retreated from the position taken in its controversy with Henry George and has never supported the Biblical solution set forth by Henry George and has no workable solution to offer. In a landlord free society it, too, will be set free.