

Henry George, *Rerum Novarum*,
and The Controversy Concerning
Private Property in Land

by
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I. Prologue

In 1879, a book was published in New York that was destined to become an all-time "best seller" among economics texts, and which was translated into all the major languages of the world. The title was *Progress and Poverty*; the author was Henry George.

Contending that monopoly of land deprived humankind of access to nature, thereby causing homelessness, unemployment, poverty, depression, and war, George proposed a "remedy" ("single tax," some have called it), by means of which only land values would be taxed, and all other levies would be abolished. Land-value taxation would make impossible the holding (especially for purposes of speculation) of the currently vast natural resources, thus causing land to become available to the public for the continuing production of wealth. Additionally, the removal of the presently prohibitive and crushing taxes on earnings, trade, improvements, and all other personal property, would, in turn, spur human endeavor toward further production of goods and satisfaction of demand. This twofold solution would end economic ills, provide necessary public revenues, restore liberty to humankind, and bring peace to the universe.

However, George warned, no economic solution could be permanently effective unless humankind abide by the precepts of



As a consequence, McGlynn was summarily excommunicated. The official order was issued on July 4, 1887, prompting McGlynn's biographer to observe ironically that the date of the decree was "the One Hundred and Eleventh anniversary of our national independence" (Bell, p. 122).

McGlynn's excommunication only triggered more controversy. Various attempts were made by the New York Church to punish the McGlynn faction, and McGlynn himself was even accused of immorality (Curran, pp. 193, 195).

Undaunted, McGlynn continued to espouse the philosophy of Henry George and to attack the Roman Catholic hierarchy. In one appearance before an enthusiastic audience, he asked rhetorically, "Who is the Pope?" and answered his own question: "A poor old bag of bones, just ready to drop into the grave" (Post, 1930, p. 94). Two weeks later, in a sensational address, McGlynn denounced "The Ecclesiastical Machine in American Politics" (Post, 1930, p. 94). Another famous speech ended with a ringing defiance: "Take up, then, the cross of a new crusade" (Bell, p. 81).

Seeing that the excommunication of McGlynn only exacerbated the schism within the Church, Corrigan and his cohorts became convinced that punishing McGlynn would not help their cause unless and until the "source" of this upheaval, Henry George, were punished as well.

In October, 1887, Corrigan "formally petitioned the Pope that the Congregation of the Index examine *Progress and Poverty*." Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore strenuously opposed this petition. "A year and a half later, the Holy Office compromised by condemning George's writings, but it refused to allow any promulgation of the condemnation" (Curran, p. 196).

George, who was a Protestant, never learned of this action by the Vatican, although he always contended, sometimes to skeptical listeners, that the encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (RN), was directed against him personally. He died in ignorance of the conspiracy against him. It is only recently that modern scholarship has unearthed these facts.

"Presumably," stated a biographer of George in the 1950s, "this condemnation . . . holds to the present day. At the very lowest estimate, the principles of Archbishop Corrigan's pastoral letter . . . were quietly endorsed by the highest authority" (Barker, 1955, pp. 489-90).

Since George was the object of papal condemnation, it is to be noted that even though he was a very religious man himself, George, nevertheless, strongly opposed organized ritual. In 1891, the year of *RN*, he wrote to a friend (as per Geiger, 1933, pp. 359-60):

How sad it is to see a church in all its branches offering men stones instead of bread, and thistles instead of figs. From Protestant preachers to the Pope, avowed teachers of Christianity are with few exceptions preaching almsgiving or socialism and ignoring the simple remedy of justice.

(Contrary to popular belief, George was not a socialist, and attacked the doctrine in his writings.)

In another letter, this one to a Catholic priest, George declared (Geiger, pp. 359-60): "It is very sad to see all clergymen . . . avoid the simple principle of justice. As Tolstoi has put it, they are willing to do anything for the poor, except get off their backs."

As will be seen from his *Open Letter (OL)* to the Pope, however, George addressed the pontiff with a great deal of respect. Even while disagreeing with him, George acknowledged that the Pope was "animated by a desire to help the suffering and the oppressed" (Barker, p. 572). And in a comment made after *RN* was published, he admitted: "I have for some time believed Leo XIII to be a very great man" (Barker, p. 576).

This was the situation in 1891 (a little more than one hundred years ago), when Pope Leo's encyclical burst upon the world.

II. Dialogue

A. The Publications

On May 15, 1891, appeared *RN*, Pope Leo's encyclical, "often . . . called the Magna Charta of the workingman" (Barker, p. 571). This same biographer of George indicated that the encyclical represented a desire by the Catholic Church, "in a democratic age to seek popular in place of princely support," and a wish to establish "a new organization of society based upon some conception of equality" (Barker, p. 571).

The basic theme of *RN* was that since "the very poor . . . were wretched and defenseless," the Pope felt compelled to propose his own solution to the economic problem. While repudiating "socialism" and justifying private property in land, the pontiff advocated the formation of labor unions, in the spirit of the medieval guilds. He also suggested that the State help redress injustice where and when needed (Barker, pp. 571-72).

Henry George reacted to *RN* by immediately claiming that even though the book professed to be a denunciation of "socialism," it was actually an attack on George and his views. Interestingly, his arch enemy, Corrigan, agreed with this contention. "Neither Henry George nor the single tax proposition were specifically named," wrote George's son, "yet Archbishop Corrigan . . . hailed the papal letter as the highest sanction of his own opposition to the single tax doctrine as preached by Dr. McGlynn and Henry George." Cardinal Manning also declared "that the Pope's letter aimed at the Henry George's teachings" (Henry George, Jr., 1900, 1960, pp. 565-66).

Not everyone agreed with the view that the Pope had George in mind when he wrote the encyclical. George's son commented: "A number of Mr. George's Catholic friends from the first contended that the Pope did not condemn the single tax doctrine" (George, Jr., p. 565). A noted biographer of George, usually sympathetic to his views, felt that there was a "suspicion of megalomania in Henry George's hot individual reaction to a document drawn up for universal reading and guidance" (Barker, pp. 572-73).

George would not be swayed from his conviction. He firmly declared (George, Jr., pp. 565-66):

For my part, I regard the encyclical letter as aimed at us, and at us alone, almost. And I feel very much encouraged by the honor I think I ought to write something about it. Of course the Pope's letter is very weak; but to reply to him might give an opportunity of explaining our principles to many people who know little or nothing about them.

George decided, therefore, that it was necessary to compose an immediate answer to the Pope's encyclical--and he did. "The reply, which took the form of an open letter to the Pope, grew in his hands . . . It was not finished until September, and comprised twenty-five thousand words; twice as many as the encyclical, which he printed with it" (George, Jr., p. 566).

George sent this reply, known as *The Condition of Labor: An Open Letter to Pope Leo XIII (OL)*, to the pontiff in September, 1891. "In addition, Leo received into his own hands, from the prefect of the Vatican Library, a handsome copy of the Italian edition" (Barker, pp. 574-75). This "handsomely printed and bound copy was presented to the Pope, but George never received any acknowledgement of his work from the Holy See" (Geiger, p. 363).

Did the Pope actually read George's reply? One biographer declared: "George learned that he did, more than once" (Barker, p. 574). In 1892, George remarked: "Whether he ever read my letter I cannot tell, but he had been acting as though he had not only read it, but had recognized its force" (Barker, p. 576). A modern scholar, who recently traveled to the Vatican to search the archives for the American and the Italian editions of George's *OL*, could find neither copy, nor any reference to them (Nuesse, 1985, p. 248).

One Catholic writer believed that it would have made no difference in the final outcome whether the Pope read the *OL* or not, since George and the Pope just would not have been able to communicate with each other. The Pope relied on classical Catholic philosophy, which "limited" the right to untold

possession of wealth. George, on the other hand, was said to be influenced by the thinking of John Locke, which emphasized the right to possess, without limit, *all* the fruits of one's labor (Benestad, 1980, p. 115). (It is amusing to note that *both* the Pope and George, on opposite sides of the argument, called their respective opponents "socialists.")

How did the friends and foes of George regard his *OL*? George's followers were ecstatic and jubilant; George's detractors were outraged by his "insolence" in daring to lecture the Pope. "The Archbishop and his friends," wrote McGlynn's biographer, "including the bulk of the secular press . . . ridiculed the pretensions" of Henry George "to debate these high matters with so great a personality as the Pope" (Bell, p. 208).

It is time to discuss, thematically, the Pope's *Condition of Labor* (otherwise known as *RN*) with George's *Condition of Labor: An Open Letter to Pope Leo XIII* (otherwise known as *OL*). To that we now turn.

B. The Confrontation

The best way to present an analysis of *RN* and the *OL*, and to compare and contrast the main views of Pope Leo XIII and Henry George, is to "set up" a fictitious debate (a philosophical dialectic) wherein the exact words of each man will be used. Since the Pope's encyclical letter appeared first, George, of necessity, has the final word. (As seen above, the Pope never responded to George's *OL*.)

The "confrontation" follows below. (For the purpose of this "dramatic dialogue," all quotation marks at the beginning and end of each paragraph are omitted.)

Pope: Socialists, working on the poor man's envy of the rich, endeavor to destroy private property They are emphatically unjust, because they would rob the lawful possessor (Leo XIII, 1982, p. 111).

George: Your use . . . of the inclusive term "property" or "private property" . . . makes your meaning . . . ambiguous. But reading it as a whole, there can be no doubt of your intention that private property in land shall be understood when you speak merely of private property (George, 1982, p. 24).

Private property in land, no less than property in slaves, is a violation of the true rights of property. They are different forms of the same robbery (George, p. 26).

The essence of slavery is in empowering one man to obtain the labor of another without recompense. Private property in land does this as fully as chattel slavery (George, p. 26).

Pope: When a man engages in remunerative labor, the very reason and motive of his work is to obtain property, and to hold it as his own private possession. . . . Thus, if he lives sparingly, saves money, and invests his savings, for greater security, in land, the land in such a case is only his wages in another form; and consequently, a workingman's little estate thus purchased should be as completely at his own disposal as the wages he receives for his labor (Leo XIII, pp. 111-12).

George: Purchase and sale cannot give, but can only transfer ownership. Property that in itself has no moral sanction does not obtain moral sanction by passing from seller to buyer.

If right reason does not make the slave the property of the slave-hunter, it does not make him the property of the slave-buyer. Yet your reasoning as to private property in land would as well justify property in slaves (George, pp. 61-62).

Pope: Man . . . not only can possess the fruits of the earth, but also the earth itself Nature . . . owes to man a storehouse that shall never fail, the daily supply of his daily wants. And this he finds only in the inexhaustible fertility of the earth (Leo XIII, p. 113).

George: Man may indeed hold in private ownership the fruits of the earth produced by his labor But he cannot so own the earth itself, for that is the reservoir from which must constantly be drawn not only the material with which alone men can produce, but even their very bodies (George, p. 31).

Industry expended on land gives ownership in the fruits of that industry, but not in the land itself, just as industry expended on the ocean would give a right of ownership to the fish taken by it, but not a right of ownership in the ocean (George, p. 37).

Pope: When a man . . . spends the industry of his mind and the strength of his body in procuring the fruits of nature, by that act he makes his own that portion of nature's field which he cultivates--that portion on which he leaves, as it were, the impress of his own personality; and it cannot but be just that he should possess that portion as his own, and should have a right to keep it without molestation (Leo XIII, p. 114).

For the soil which is tilled and cultivated with toil and skill utterly changes its condition; it was wild before, it is now fruitful; it was barren, and now it brings forth in abundance. That which has thus altered and improved it becomes so truly part of itself as to be in great measure indistinguishable and inseparable from it. Is it just that the fruit of a man's sweat and labor should be enjoyed by another (Leo XIII, pp. 114-15)?

George: If industry give ownership to land, what are the limits of this ownership? . . . Is it on the rights given by the industry of those who first used it for grazing cows or growing potatoes that you would found the title to the land now covered by the city of New York and having a value of thousands of millions of dollars?

There is, indeed, no improvement of land, . . . that, so long as its usefulness continues, does not have a value distinguishable from the value of the land. For land having such improvements will always sell or rent for more than similar land without them (George, p. 36-38).

Pope: The common opinion of mankind . . . has consecrated by the practice of all ages the principle of private ownership, as being preeminently in conformity with human nature, and as conducting in the most unmistakable manner to the peace and tranquillity of human life (Leo XIII, p. 115).

George: Even were it true that the common opinion of mankind has sanctioned private property in land, this would no more prove its justice than the once universal practice of the known world would have proved the justice of slavery.

But it is not true. Examination will show that wherever we can trace them the first perceptions of mankind have always recognized the equality of right to land.

Private property in land as we know it . . . has never grown up anywhere save by usurpation or force. Like slavery, it is the result of war (George, pp. 40-41).

As to private property in land having conduced to the peace and tranquillity of human life, it is not necessary more than to allude to the notorious fact that the struggle for land has been the prolific source of wars and of lawsuits, while it is the poverty

engendered by private property in land that makes the prison and the workhouse the unfailing attributes of what we call Christian civilization (George, p. 43).

Pope: The right to possess private property is from nature, not from man; and the State has only the right to regulate its use in the interests of the public good, but by no means to abolish it altogether. The State is therefore unjust and cruel if, in the name of taxation, it deprives the private owner of more than is just (Leo XIII, p. 141).

George: That private property in the products of labor is from nature is clear, for nature gives such things to labor, and to labor alone.

But who will dare trace the individual ownership of land to any grant from the Maker of land? . . . How can . . . individual ownership attach to land, which existed before man was, and which continues to exist while the generations of men come and go? So far from there being anything unjust in taking the value of landownership for the use of the community, the real injustice is in leaving it in private hands--an injustice that amounts to robbery and murder (George, pp. 52-53).

Pope: Whenever the general interest of any particular class suffers, or is threatened with, evils which can in no other way be met, the public authority must step in to meet them The limits must be determined by the nature of the occasion which calls for the law's interference (Leo XIII, pp. 133-34).

George: I have already referred generally to the defects that attach to all socialistic remedies for the evil condition of labor.

Of these, the widest and strongest are that the State should restrict the hours of labor, the

employment of women and children, the unsanitary conditions of workshops, etc. Yet how little may in this way be accomplished.

The greatest difficulty in enforcing such regulations comes from those whom they are intended to benefit. It is not, for instance, the masters who make it difficult to enforce restrictions on child labor in factories, but the mothers, who, prompted by poverty, misrepresent the ages of their children even to the masters, and teach the children to misrepresent.

Nor can the State cure poverty by regulating wages. It is as much beyond the power of the State to regulate wages as it is to regulate the rates of interest (George, pp. 71-73).

Pope: If a workman's wages be sufficient . . . he will not find it difficult . . . to put by a little property; nature and reason would urge him to do this The law, therefore, should favor ownership.

Many excellent results will follow from this; and first of all, property will certainly become more equitably divided If working-people can be encouraged to look forward to obtaining a share in the land, the result will be that the gulf between vast wealth and deep poverty will be bridged over (Leo XIII, p. 140).

George: The same hopelessness attends your suggestion that working-people should be encouraged by the State in obtaining a share of the land Supposing that this can be done even to a considerable extent, what will be accomplished save to substitute a larger privileged class for a smaller privileged class (George, p. 74)?

Pope: Most important . . . are Workmen's Associations History attests what excellent results were effected by the Artificers' Guilds of a

former day . . . such associations should be adapted to the requirements of the age in which we live (Leo XIII, p. 141).

George: Labor associations can do nothing to raise wages but by force . . . They *must* coerce or hold the power to coerce employers; they *must* coerce those among their own members disposed to straggle; they *must* do their best to get into their hands the whole field of labor they seek to occupy and to force other working-men either to join them or to starve. Those who tell you of trades-unions bent on raising wages by moral suasion alone are like those who would tell you of tigers that live on oranges (George, p. 77).

What I wish to point out is that trades-unionism, while it may be a partial palliative, is not a remedy; that it has not that moral character which could alone justify one in the position of your Holiness in urging it as good in itself. Yet, so long as you insist on private property in land, what better can you do (George, p. 80)?

Pope: Every minister of holy Religion must . . . cherish . . . and try to arouse in others, Charity, the mistress and queen of virtues, for the happy results we all long for must be chiefly brought about by the plenteous outpouring of Charity . . . which is always ready to sacrifice itself for others' sake, and which is man's surest antidote against worldly pride and immoderate love of self (Leo XIII, p. 151).

George: Charity is indeed a noble and beautiful virtue, grateful to man and approved by God. But charity must be built on justice. It cannot supersede justice.

What is wrong with the condition of labor through the Christian world is that labor is robbed.

And while you justify the continuance of that robbery, it is idle to urge charity.

All that charity can do where injustice exists is here and there to mollify somewhat the effects of injustice. It cannot cure them.

And thus that pseudo-charity that discards and denies justice works evil. On the one side, it demoralizes the recipients On the other side, it acts as an anodyne to the consciences of those who are living on the robbery of their fellows (George, pp. 92-93).

Servant of the Servants of God! I call you by the strongest and sweetest of your titles. In your hands more than in those of any living man lies the power to say the words and make the sign that shall end an unnatural divorce, and marry again to religion all that is pure and high in social aspiration (George, p. 104).

III. Epilogue

What happened after the publication of *RN* and *OL*? How did the two letters influence the consequent events, especially in New York and in Rome?

"No formal reply was ever made by Pope Leo to Henry George's rejoinder," wrote McGlynn's biographer (Bell, p. 124), "but it was not without its effects in Rome." A year and a half after *RN* appeared, a "most important episode" occurred. Dr. McGlynn was fully reinstated, "not at the instance of Dr. McGlynn himself, but of the Papal authorities." McGlynn drew up his own doctrinal statement. It was reviewed by a committee of four church authorities, who declared that it contained "nothing contrary to Catholic teachings," and on December 23, 1892, "Dr. McGlynn was declared free from ecclesiastical censures, and was restored to the exercise of his priestly functions" (Geiger, pp. 354-56). This restoration was accomplished without even consulting Archbishop Corrigan and his shocked supporters.

George's son wrote about the matter: "Many have thought that the reply that Henry George made to the papal encyclical in 1891 . . . had influenced the broadminded Leo XIII to review the case" (George, Jr., p. 560). In any case, "in June 1893, Father McGlynn visited Rome and was graciously received by the Pope, who gave him his apostolic blessing" (Geiger, p. 356). McGlynn later became pastor of St. Mary's Church in Newburgh, New York, remaining there until his death in 1900.

To the followers of McGlynn and George, McGlynn's victory was a cause of great rejoicing. "It is interesting," wrote a noted Georgist scholar, "that Henry George and Edward McGlynn won the greatest vindication--adoption of their position by the Magisterium, the teaching authority" (Lissner, p. 1). "But Father McGlynn's vindication," the writer noted further (Lissner, p. 3), "was to be even more complete. At the second Vatican Council, the Council Fathers ranged the Church on the side of land reform in the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World."

McGlynn lived to deliver a most impassioned eulogy at the funeral of Henry George, whom he survived by less than three years. He himself is remembered and loved (to this day) by Georgist followers, one of whom paid this tribute to his memory: "There is already a bronze monument to McGlynn, but he has in fact wrought out for himself a monument more lasting than bronze" (O'Regan, 1942, p. 11).

What about Henry George? How did he fare after the publications of the Pope's letter and his own in reply?

A prominent Georgist answered the question unequivocally: "Henry George read the Pope a lesson in the history of economic doctrines and in the relations between economics and ethics in his *OL*. The work of George's had a profound influence upon Catholic social thinking in Europe and America" (Lissner, p. 3).

However, a biographer of George remained dubious about George's influence on the Pope:

Recent Catholic scholarship assumes that George's book did have an effect within the Church, and did help to restore McGlynn. This seems the only

plausible assumption. Yet if this is true, the outsider's little book helped to establish a very puzzling church situation. For the . . . decision appears to contradict utterly the secret condemnation of George's works, by the Inquisition, three years earlier (Barker, p. 577).

A well-known Georgist theorist also had his doubts about George's influence on the Vatican.

There is . . . no evidence to show that George's letter had any bearing upon Father McGlynn's unsolicited reinstatement. It is probable that this unusual action on the part of the Holy See was instead determined largely on the grounds of general church policy, for Dr. McGlynn's punishment had created a decided schism in the ranks of New York and even of American Catholicism (Geiger, p. 370).

What about Pope Leo's social status after the publication of the encyclical? Mention was already made of *RN* as the "Magna Charta" of the working man. The Pope's encyclical was of decisive import in Catholic social tradition. *RN*, according to one source,

still stands as the authoritative utterance of Pope Leo XIII. Succeeding Pontiffs and innumerable priests and prelates have quoted from it and endorse it. It still seems to condemn the Georcean land doctrine. Its apparent inconsistency with the judgment of . . . the Catholic . . . authorities in the McGlynn case puzzled many clergymen and laymen (Bell, p. 298).

At the present time, this case continues to puzzle. The matter remains unresolved.



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About the Author

Jack Schwartzman possesses two doctorates, J.S.D. and Ph.D. In addition, he was an attorney in the State of New York for fifty-seven years. He is the editor-in-chief of *Fragments*, an international individualist magazine. Schwartzman is the author of three books and several hundred articles, including the widely-acclaimed *Rebels of Individualism* (1949) and the much-reprinted "Lilacs" (1966).

At Nassau Community College, New York, he was a professor of English for thirty years, during which time he was awarded the New York State Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Teaching in 1974. In January, 1993, he retired from law and from teaching, the latter with the title of professor emeritus. The president of his college wrote him: "Upon your retirement, you will rightfully assume the designation of 'Legend.'"

Born in 1912 in the Ukraine, then part of Russia, Schwartzman and his family fled from the former Soviet Union in 1922, finally arriving in the U.S. in the late 1920s. He served in the Army of U.S. in World War II (1942-46). On March 22, 1991, Thomas S. Gulotta, county executive of Nassau County, New York, proclaimed that day as "Dr. Jack Schwartzman Day."

Schwartzman resides today in Long Island, New York, but maintains a lifelong dedication to public speaking, writing, editing, and publishing his esteemed literary magazine, *Fragments*.