

# The Earth Is the Lord's

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George Bernard Shaw, in a letter written in 1905 to Hamlin Garland, describes how, more than twenty years earlier, he had attended Henry George's first platform appearance in London. He knew at once, he said, that the speaker must be an American, for four reasons: "Because he pronounced 'necessarily' . . . with the accent on the third syllable instead of the first; because he was deliberately and intentionally oratorical, which is not customary among shy people like the English; because he spoke of Liberty, Justice, Truth, Natural Law, and other strange eighteenth-century superstitions; and because he explained with great simplicity and sincerity the views of the Creator, who had gone completely out of fashion in London in the previous decade and had not been heard of there since."

George's *magnum opus*, *Progress and Poverty* (the centenary of which occurred in 1979), is characterized by the same moral and religious emphasis remarked by Shaw in its author's London lecture, an emphasis that rises in the final chapter to the noble declaration of a faith revived. It is, I think, therefore entirely appropriate that I focus today on the moral and religious aspects of his basic proposal for economic reform—his proposal to lift the burden of taxation from the fruits of individual labor, while appropriating for public use the socially-engendered value of the land.

For land value taxation is not *just* a fiscal measure (although it *is* a fiscal measure, and a sound one); not *just* a method of urban redevelopment (although it *is* a method of urban redevelopment, and an effective one); not *just* a means of stimulating business (although it *is* a means of stimulating business, and a wholesome one); not *just* an answer to unemployment (although it *is* an answer to unemployment, and a powerful one), not *just* a way to better housing (although it *is* a way to better housing, and a proven one); not *just* an approach to rational land use (although it *is* an approach to rational land use, and a non-bureaucratic one). It is all of these things, but it is also something infinitely more: it is the affirmation, prosaic though it be, of a fundamental spiritual principle—that "the earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof."

It is the affirmation of the same principle to which Moses gave embodiment in the institution of the Jubilee, and in the prohibition against removing ancient landmarks, and in the decree that the land shall not be sold forever. It is the affirmation of the same principle to which the prophets of old gave utterance when they inveighed against those who lay field

to field, and who use their neighbor's service without wages. It is the affirmation of the same principle to which Koheleth gave voice when he asserted in the fifth chapter of Ecclesiastes that "the profit of the earth is for all."

**The earth is the Lord's!** Consider what this means. It means that our God is not a pale abstraction. Our God is not a remote being who sits enthroned on some ethereal height, absorbed in the contemplation of his own perfection, oblivious to this grubby realm in which we live. Our God is concerned with the tangible, with the mundane, with what goes on in the field, in the factory, in the courthouse, in the exchange. Our God is the maker of a *material* world—a world of eating and sleeping and working and begetting, a world he loved so much that he himself became flesh and blood for its salvation. In this sense, then, our God is eminently materialistic, and nowhere is this more clearly recognized than in the Bible, which, for that very reason, has always been a stumbling-block and an offense to those Gnostics, past and present, whose delicacy is embarrassed by the fact that they inhabit bodies, and for whom religion is essentially the effort to escape from or deny that fact.

Our God is not a dainty aesthete who considers politics and economics subjects too crass or sordid for his notice. Neither is he a capricious tyrant who has enjoined an order of distribution that condemns retirees after a lifetime of toil to subsist on cat food while parasitic sybarites titillate palates jaded by the most refined achievements of the *haute cuisine*. It is men who have enjoined this order in denial of his sovereignty, in defiance of his righteous will.

**The earth is the Lord's!** To the biblical writers, this was no mere platitude. They spelled out what it meant in concrete terms. For them, it meant that the material universe which had been provided as a storehouse of natural opportunity for the children of men was not to be monopolized or despoiled or treated as speculative merchandise, but was rather to be used reverently, and conserved dutifully, and, above all, maintained as a source from which every man, by the application of his labor, might sustain himself in decent comfort. It was seen as an inalienable trust, which no individual or class could legitimately appropriate so as to exclude others, and which no generation could legitimately barter away.

**The earth is the Lord's!** With the recognition of this principle comes the recognition of the right of every man to the produce which the earth has yielded to his efforts. As the Apostle Paul says in his first letter to the Church at Corinth, if the ox has a right to a share in the grain which it treads out, surely a human being must have a right to the fruits of his labor. For the exercise of this right, he is, of course, accountable to God—but against the world, it holds.

To one who takes seriously, as I do, that insight about human nature which is expressed in the doctrine of original sin, there can be nothing self-evident about the rights of man. In the words of my friend, Edmund A. Opitz, "the idea of natural rights is not the kind of concept

which has legs of its own to stand on; as a deduction from religious premises it makes sense, otherwise not." The French Revolution and its culmination in the Reign of Terror demonstrated that humanistic assumptions afford no secure foundation for the concept of human rights. That concept, for the believer, can be neither understood nor justified except in terms of what Lord Acton so eloquently speaks of as "the equal claim of every man to be unhindered in the fulfilment by man of duty to God."

This is what it comes down to: How can a person be "unhindered in the fulfilment of duty to God" if he be denied, on the one hand, fair access to nature, the raw material without which there can be no wealth; and on the other, the full and free ownership of his own labor and its earnings?

You who have studied the history of the Peasants' Revolt in sixteenth century Germany know that in calling for the abolition of serfdom and the restoration of the common lands, the peasants were simply voicing demands which were logically implied by Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers—that the service of God to which all the faithful are elected requires, as I have said, access to the land and its resources, and the free disposal of one's person and of the guerdon of one's toil. Despite the excesses that accompanied this uprising. Luther's part in the suppression of a movement which stemmed logically from his own teaching must always be a source of pain to those of us who revere him for his spiritual genius and integrity.

**The earth is the Lord's!** The same God who established the just authority of governments has also in his providence ordained for the major source of revenue. Allow me to quote from Henry George:

In the great social fact that as population increases, and improvements are made, and men progress in civilization, the one thing that rises everywhere in value is land, we may see a proof of the beneficence of the Creator . . . In a rude state of society where there is no need for common expenditure, there is no value attaching to land. The only value which attaches there is to things produced by labor. But as civilization goes on, as a division of labor takes place, as men come into centers, so do the common wants increase and so does the necessity for public revenue arise. And so in that value which attaches to land, not by reason of anything the individual does, but by reason of the growth of the community, is a provision, intended—we may safely say

*intended—to*

meet that social want. Just as society grows, so do the common needs grow, and so grows the value attaching to land—the provided fund from which they can be supplied (George 1889).

On another occasion he wrote:

The tax on land values is the most just and equal of all taxes. It falls only upon those who receive from society a peculiar and valuable benefit, and upon them in proportion to the benefit they receive. It is the taking by the community, for the use of the community, of that value which is the creation of the community. It is the application of the common property to common uses (George, P&P, 421).

And yet, my friends, in the topsy-turvy world in which we live, this provided fund goes mainly into the pockets of speculators and monopolists, while the body politic meets its needs by extorting from individual producers the fruits of honest toil. If ever there were any doubt about the perversity of human nature, our present system of taxation is the proof! Everywhere about us, we see the ironic spectacle of the community penalizing the individual for his industry and initiative, and taking away from him a share of that which he produces, yet at the same time lavishing upon the non-producer undeserved windfalls which it—the community—produces. And, as Winston Churchill put it, the unearned increment, the socially-produced value of the land, is reaped by the speculator in exact proportion, not to the service, but to the disservice, done. “The greater the injury to society, the greater the reward.”

We hear constantly a vast clamor against the abuse of welfare. I do not for a moment condone such abuse. Yet I ask you, who is the biggest swiller at the public trough? Is it the sluggard who refuses to seek work when there is work available? Is it the slattern who generates offspring solely for the sake of the allotment they command? Or is it the man—perhaps a civic leader and a pillar of his church—who sits back, and, with perfect propriety and respectability, collects thousands and maybe even millions of dollars in unearned increments created by the public, as his reward for withholding land from those who wish to put it to productive use. Talk about free enterprise! This isn't free enterprise; this is a free ride.

But if that same person were to improve his site—if he were to use it to beautify his neighborhood, or to provide goods for consumers and jobs for workers, or housing for his fellow townsmen—instead of being treated as the public benefactor he had become, he would be fined as if he were a criminal, in the form of heavier taxes. What kind of justice is this, I ask you? How does it comport with the Divine Plan, or with the notion of human rights?

Let me make this clear: Acquisitiveness, or the “profit motive,” if you will, is a well-nigh universal fact of human nature, and I have no wish to suggest that the land monopolist or speculator has any corner on it. Even when I speak of him as a parasite, this is not to single him out for personal moral condemnation. He is not necessarily any more greedy than the average run of people. As my late friend, Sidney G. Evans, used to say: “if you have to live under a corrupt system, it's better to be a beneficiary than a victim of it.” But the profit

motive can be channeled in ways which are socially desirable as well as in ways which are socially destructive. Is it not our duty to do everything we can to build an order without victims one in which the profit motive is put to use in such a way that everybody benefits?

I do not harbor the illusion that the millennium is going to be ushered in by any program of social betterment. My theological orientation does not happen to be one which minimizes the stubbornness of man's depravity. Yet to make the depth of human wickedness an alibi for indifference to the demands of social justice is to ignore the will of him who said:

Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
to the melody of your harps I will not listen.  
But let justice roll down like waters,  
And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.  
(Amos 5:23-24)

To some of you, the promotion of specific programs for social justice is seen as part of the responsibility of the institutional church; to others it is not. But all of us, I am sure, can agree that the individual Christian (or Jew or Moslem, Hindu or Buddhist, as the case may be) has a solemn moral obligation to study the issues carefully, and then involve himself strenuously in whatever social and political efforts his informed conscience tells him best advance the cause of right.

O shame to us who rest content  
While lust and greed for gain  
In street and shop and tenement  
Wring gold from human pain,  
And bitter lips in blind despair  
Cry, "Christ hath died in vain!"  
Give us, O God, the strength to build  
The city that hath stood  
Too long a dream, whose laws are love,  
Whose ways are brotherhood,  
And where the sun that shineth is  
God's grace for human good.\*

### **The earth is the Lord's!**

\* From "O Holy City, Seen of John" by Walter Russell Bowie.  
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