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Henry George and the Catholic Views of Morality and the Common Good, II:

George's Proposals in the Context of Perennial Philosophy

By J. BRIAN BENESTAD*

I

A Response to George Based on Catholic Political Principles

IN THE FIRST of the modern social encyclicals expressing the mind of the church on societal problems and in the letter of reply to the Pontiff by the American social philosopher, Pope Leo XIII and Henry George really do not communicate with one another.¹ Leo XIII's approach to political reform draws heavily on classical and medieval political philosophy. Henry George, on the contrary, belongs to the tradition of modern political philosophy, with close ties to the thought of John Locke. Following Locke, George argues that one has a property in his or her person and, therefore, is entitled to all the fruits of one's labor. Both Locke and George further contend that there is an unlimited right to wealth one produces or acquires by exchange, and defend unlimited acquisition by one's labor as socially beneficial. George differs from Locke in denying the right to own land. George's denial of the right to own land stems from the instincts of a generous heart, even from a strong moral fervor. If land rent were to accrue to the State by means of the Single Tax, he believed, there would never again be poverty amidst progress. Not only scarcity would be overcome, but also unjust behavior. Wilson Carey McWilliams explains, "George believed that an abundant love for his fellows would emerge in man were economic scarcity once banished from the earth."²

From Pope Leo XIII's perspective on people and society, George's expectations from restrictions on land ownership, coupled with the unlimited right to accumulate all other kinds of wealth, are utopian to say the least. George believes that these two reforms would abolish scarcity and thus injustice and render unnecessary Leo's stress on the role of religion, voluntary associations and the State in solving social problems. In Leo's mind the problem of social

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reform is much more complex and intractable than George ever suspected. It requires conversion to virtue, many kinds of public and private initiatives, and the continuous exercise of prudence by leaders in the various sectors of society.

George's defense of the unlimited right to acquire wealth by one's labor rests on a principle that the Catholic Church could never accept. This is the Lockean view that one has a property in one's person. According to Catholic teaching the human being is created in God's image, redeemed by Jesus Christ and is a temple of the Holy Spirit. No one owns one's person or body but rather receives them as a gift from God. People do not have a right to dispose of themselves as they see fit. Rather they have a duty to have reverence for their person and body, to live their lives in accordance with God's will. No one is allowed to commit suicide, or mutilate oneself, which actions would be permitted if one enjoyed a property in one's person.

George's defense of unlimited acquisition through one's labor or in exchange for one's product further flies in the face of the Biblical and Catholic teaching on the proper attitude toward money. Avarice has always been condemned in the Catholic tradition. Jesus said you can not serve God and mammon; Paul argued that love of money is the root of all evil. As a result of these teachings and others, the Catholic Church has always stressed the duty to limit one's desires for material goods as well as the duty to share with others.

Furthermore, George's defense of unlimited accumulation of property other than land would, according to Catholic social thought, increase the amount of injustice in society. Classical and medieval political philosophies would argue in a similar vein. The only possible justification for George's defense of unlimited accumulation is found in the philosophy of John Locke and Adam Smith. They hold that private vice by an invisible hand produces the public good. If this principle were true, then George could not be criticized for failing to elaborate ethical and political principles which would limit the acquisition of wealth.

There is no real contradiction between Pope Leo's political principles and George's recommendation for land policy. A Single Tax on land, while not required by Catholic social thought, is surely compatible with it. Whether George's land policy should be adopted by a State is a judgment of political prudence which could vary according to time and circumstances.

In the late 19th century, a priest of the New York Archdiocese, Dr. Edward McGlynn, ran afoul of his religious superiors for advocating George's ideas on land reform and for refusing to submit to discipline. In fact he was excommunicated for a period of six years. On December 23, 1892, Msgr. Francisco Satolli, Pope Leo XIII's ablegate, reinstated Father McGlynn after he and a commission of theologians and canon lawyers examined a doctrinal statement prepared by the priest. About that statement they said,

there was nothing in the land philosophy preached by Father McGlynn that was contrary to Christian faith or to Catholic doctrine.³

I would accept the judgment of Msgr. Satolli and the commission in this regard. Neither Christian faith nor Catholic doctrine prohibits a Catholic from accepting George's approach to land policy. A Catholic is free to argue that the State should allow possession of land but restrict ownership. Father McGlynn, however, is surely mistaken in arguing that there must only be one right way of raising revenue for the State, a Single Tax on land values. Reasonable Catholics can surely legitimately argue that there are other equally good or better ways of raising revenue. Will not the best method of taxation vary from age to age and from country to country?

On the other hand, George's contention that a Single Tax on land is really the only moral way of raising revenue for the state would be rejected by Catholic political thought as an improper mixing of religion and politics. George's position reminds me of the contemporary tendency of Catholics, both on the left and the right of the political spectrum, to equate their political opinions with Gospel truth. Catholic political principles may suggest in many cases a certain kind of policy, but in others any number of policy options could be chosen. In Pope John Paul II's words,

In her social doctrine the Church does not propose a concrete political or economic model, but indicates the way, presents principles.⁴

Furthermore, George's claim that a Single Tax on land would do away with scarcity and thus injustice in society and produce love in the heart of man could never be reconciled with Catholic doctrine. According to that doctrine, human beings cannot overcome selfishness and learn to love one another without divine grace. Society can never overcome injustice until, at the very least, individuals undergo a conversion. The traditional Catholic view is succinctly and even humourously stated by Thomas More in his *Utopia*.

But you should try and strive obliquely to settle everything as best you may, and what you cannot turn to good, you should make as little evil as possible. For it is not possible for everything to be good unless all men are good, and I do not expect that will come about for many years.⁵

George does have a point even on Catholic grounds in objecting to Pope Leo XIII's strong defense of the right to property; the Pope characterizes that right as sacred. While George does accept the sacred right to the fruits of one's labor, he strongly objects to making sacred the right to own land. Leo's defense of all ownership is somewhat exaggerated in comparison with the treatment of Thomas Aquinas. As mentioned, unlike Thomas, Pope Leo XIII argues that nature has conferred on human beings a right to property. Furthermore, Leo seems to

expect great benefits from private ownership: “. . . however the earth may be apportioned among private owners, it does not cease to serve the common interest of all. . . .”⁶ Surely, this far-reaching claim is not true. Some property arrangements will not be conducive to the common good.

Msgr. John A. Ryan attempts to state the longstanding Catholic position on the ownership of property in these terms. He argues that the Christian tradition does not uphold an absolute right to land. “Ownership, understood as the right to do what one pleases with one’s possessions is due . . . chiefly to modern theories of individualism.”⁷ The natural right to land is not an end in itself.

It has validity only insofar as it promotes individual and social welfare. . . . To interpret man’s natural right to land by any other standard than human welfare, is to make of it a fetish, not a thing of reason.⁸

Ryan candidly admits that the private ownership of land does not secure perfect justice because it is an imperfect social arrangement. Despite his intemperate praise of private property, Leo also recognizes the limits of this institution. Otherwise, he would not have devoted so much of *Rerum Novarum* to explaining how religion and the Church, the State and voluntary associations contribute to the resolution of the social problem. Nevertheless, George is correct in noting the extraordinary praise Leo bestows on private ownership of land.

II

What George and Leo XIII Had in Common

BECAUSE OF HENRY GEORGE’S GREAT RESPECT for virtue, patriotism, and love of God, it is ironic that he and Pope Leo XIII had such different approaches to political and social reform. There is no doubt that George wrote his works in order to promote respect for everything decent and sublime. The words, honor, duty, sympathy, virtue, justice, love of God, public spirit and respect for law, meant much to George. It pained him to see vice and injustice in the United States. He wrote with great passion and eloquence in order to combat these evils. In their respect for the Christian faith, love of virtue and hatred of vice, Henry George and Pope Leo XIII had much in common; both men also rejected the materialism and individualism of John Locke.

The reason for the great differences between George and papal social teaching was the former’s belief that virtue is not possible until scarcity is overcome. George believed that against temptations to greed, power, and prestige, which appealed to the strongest impulses of our nature, “the sanctions of law and the precepts of religion can effect but little.”⁹ The only solution for George was to

effect reforms in society which would make possible doing away with scarcity by one's labor. Once fear of want was overcome by adoption of his land policy, George believed that virtue and love of God would once again be possible. People would not be vicious, George thought, if they did not fear deprivation. In the Single Tax on land, George felt he had found the solution to society's ills. Convinced that his land policy would lead to prosperity and virtue, George wrote with a passionate moral fervor.

In opting for a certain land policy as a cure-all and in justifying the unlimited acquisition of wealth George revealed himself to be an unwitting disciple of modern political philosophy. I say unwitting because George did not share the low view of human life held by Machiavelli, Hobbes or Locke. These philosophers did not believe that virtue and love of God perfect the human soul, as George did. Nevertheless, in my judgment, George compromised his Christian beliefs by espousing a political philosophy which promised a solution to political and social problems without prior conversion to virtue. George differs from Hobbes and Locke in arguing that genuine moral conversion and belief in God would flourish if scarcity were overcome.

Where does all this leave George's ideas on land reform? I think the greatest service one could render to the memory of George and his genuine effort to show compassion for the poor would be to separate his ideas on land reform from their philosophical and theological underpinnings. Even if George's land policy would not overcome scarcity, and eliminate vice and produce love of God, it might indeed contribute to bringing about a more just society. George's idea of creating access to the land for all and of promoting the fruitful use of land are surely admirable goals. It is up to economists, political philosophers and other citizens to decide whether the Single Tax on land values or some variation thereof will indeed contribute to a more just distribution of material goods.

III

Natural Rights and the Common Good in Catholic Social Thought

LEO XIII's *Rerum Novarum* (1891) proved to be a decisive catalyst for Catholic social thought and action. Subsequent papal encyclicals on political and socio-economic issues constantly refer to *Rerum Novarum*, mention its great impact and substantially follow its general outlines.¹⁰ For example, Pope John Paul II in *Laborem Exercens* (1981) explains the Catholic teaching on the possession and use of property in the same framework and in almost the same words as Leo XIII:

The Church's teaching . . . diverges radically from the program of collectivism as proclaimed by Marxism and put into practice in various countries in the decades following the time of Leo XIII's encyclical [*i.e.*, *Rerum Novarum*]. At the same time it differs from the program of capitalism practiced by liberalism and by the political systems inspired by it. In the latter case, the difference consists in the way the right to ownership or property is understood. Christian tradition has never upheld this right as absolute and untouchable. On the contrary, it has always understood this right within the broader context of the right common to all to use the goods of the whole of creation; *the right to private property is subordinated to the right to common use.*¹¹

John Paul II perhaps makes it more clear than Leo XIII that all goods of the earth have a universal destination. Everyone is entitled "to use the goods of the whole creation." At the same time he upholds the right to private property. The present pontiff is really saying that society should find a way to ensure universal access to material goods, including land, without abolishing private ownership. The popes from Leo XIII to John Paul II agree in principle with George's dictum that "we must make land common property." They differ from George in arguing that all external goods should in a sense be common; and unlike George they do not endorse one specific mode of making land common.

Henry George and the modern popes have shared a passion for bringing about a more equitable distribution of property. Reading Henry George and the papal social encyclicals together serves to remind us how important some notion of the common good is for society. In a time when contemporary moral theory is built upon individualistic premises, whether in the form of utilitarianism or deontological liberalism, there is a great need to resurrect thinkers with thoughts out of season.

George rightly sensed that Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* was an important document, worthy of commentary. I suspect, that few others, if any, realized how important it would be for the development of modern Catholic social thought in the 20th century. The strengths and weaknesses of that thought depend to a large extent on *Rerum Novarum*. Hence, a reading of that encyclical and the authors who shaped Leo XIII's thought may provide an important key to improving Catholic social thought. Now that the Vatican archives of Leo XIII's papacy are available for public inspection, the task of unearthing and assessing the origins of Leo XIII's thought will be much easier.

Even without the archives it is possible to shed some more light on Catholic social thought by extrapolating some of George's criticisms of Leo XIII. While George did not thoroughly examine *Rerum Novarum*, he did make a few remarks which point in the direction of a fruitful analysis. George accuses Leo of *inventing* both the right to employment and the right to "a certain indefinite wage." George also vehemently objects to Leo XIII's strong defense of the right to property in

land. I believe, as already mentioned, that Leo XIII expects too much from the results of private ownership. Surely, it is not true to say with Leo XIII that “. . . however the earth may be apportioned among private owners, it does not cease to serve the common interest of all. . . .”

Leo XIII's emphasis on the right to property as well as other rights has been reinforced by later popes, especially Pope John XXIII and Pope John Paul II. As there is no doctrine of rights in the thought of Aquinas and Augustine or the Bible, what then is the origin of the Catholic teaching on rights? The question is whether Catholic rights teaching evolved from Catholic thinkers, or from the natural rights teaching of Hobbes and Locke, or from the philosophy of Kant or from some other source.

This question is very important because Catholic social thought has focused on rights either to the detriment, or even neglect of duties and the common good. This is understandable because of the stress on rights in philosophical circles and in political discourse and activity.

In its best form, Catholic teaching on rights, while preserving a traditional understanding of duties and the common good, as in the papal social encyclicals, is not widely known nor adequately presented to Catholics, not to mention non-Catholics. Nearly everyone today is educated to think about society and the State in Lockean, Kantian or egalitarian terms. In its inferior forms, Catholic teaching on rights loses a balanced perspective and adopts one or the other aforementioned philosophical views.

Both Leo XIII and John Paul II properly subordinate rights to duties. In other words, persons are entitled to rights because they have God-given duties to fulfill. Both Leo XIII and John Paul II accept the primacy of the common good over rights. Still, both popes lay more stress on rights than on the common good.

Pope John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris* has become the classic statement of Catholic teaching on natural rights. While John XXIII also accepts the primacy of the common good and duties over right, it should be noted that the subordination of rights to duties is not very clearly stated in *Pacem in Terris*. Pope John lays such stress on the rights of man that his comments on duties are hardly noticed. Paragraphs eleven to twenty-seven indicate man's rights. Paragraph twenty-eight says that man has as many duties as rights, and paragraph twenty-nine gives three examples of duties; namely, to preserve life, to live becomingly, and to seek the truth. Paragraphs thirty to thirty-eight mention in general terms the duty to work for the rights of others. This one-sided emphasis on rights could very easily lead people to believe that Pope John's teaching on rights is not essentially different from the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, the

Declaration of Independence or the French Declaration on the Rights of Man. *Pacem in Terris* makes the Church sound like a proponent of a teaching on rights which is divorced from a teaching on duties.

The advantage of a stress on rights is that most people tend to think about justice and the public interest in terms of rights—political and/or socioeconomic. Respect for rights, enforced by national laws and international covenants, is one of the few barriers against various kinds of injustice. Talking the language of rights provides the Catholic Church with an entry into public discourse and into scholarly debate, and enables the Church to promote justice in the world.

While the advantages of rights teachings should not be underestimated, their disadvantages should not be overlooked. There is a profound disagreement about the foundation of rights. Some scholars think there are no solid philosophical grounds for respecting rights. Alasdair MacIntyre, in his widely read book, *After Virtue*, makes that argument with considerable persuasiveness. He concludes,

The best reason for asserting so bluntly that there are no such rights is indeed of precisely the same type as the best reason which we possess for asserting that there are no witches and the best reason which we possess for asserting that there are no unicorns, every attempt to give good reasons for believing that there *are* such rights has failed.¹²

MacIntyre goes on to point out that one of the latest defenders of human rights, Ronald Dworkin (*Taking Rights Seriously*, 1976), concludes that no one has demonstrated the existence of such rights, but argues that they *may* nevertheless exist on solid foundation. This is true, MacIntyre responds, “but could equally be used to defend claims about unicorns and witches.”

Given the pervasive relativism and even nihilism of the present age, widespread societal doubt of the existence of rights could cause considerable disruption. The bonds of society are fragile enough without losing respect for rights. A teaching without foundation, however, will not last indefinitely. Nietzsche’s comment about Christian morality is pertinent. He argued that if God is dead in the hearts of people Christian morality is without foundation and would eventually be abandoned. Respect for human rights is subject to the same fate.

IV

The Modern Popes and the Political Philosophers

SCHOLARS MAY DEBATE whether the modern popes have provided a solid foundation for human rights on theological grounds. In my judgement they have been more successful than Hobbes, Locke and Kant. Be that as it may, Catholic

political and social teachings also include serious reflections on the common good and duties. Because of the stress on rights these essential aspects of the Catholic tradition have not been sufficiently expounded in a modern context.

A clear exposition of Catholic teaching on the common good and duties would make an important contribution to modern society by showing conclusively that reliance on rights teachings is insufficient for building a polity based on justice and fraternity. Since all papal social encyclicals have taken their bearings from *Rerum Novarum*, it is important to discover what led Leo XIII to adopt the language of natural rights and to downplay, though by no means neglect, the Catholic tradition on the common good.

Going back to the origins of modern Catholic social thought, together with a reappropriation of the political thought of such theologians as Augustine and Aquinas, may provide some guidance in confronting the problems caused by modern individualism and materialism.

Those embracing the political and social ideals of Henry George would find much to approve in an intelligent revival of the Catholic view of the common good. Who can doubt that society would benefit not only by finding a way to hold property in common without abolishing private property, but also by sharing, more widely and deeply, convictions on economic, social and political matters as well as spiritual concerns about good and bad, and the meaning of virtue?

Notes

1. For the basis of this discussion, see the first part of this report: "Henry George and the Catholic View of Morality and the Common Good, I: George's Overall Critique of Pope Leo XIII's Classic Encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (July, 1985), pp 365ff.
2. Wilson Carey McWilliams, *The Idea of Fraternity in America* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1973), p. 387.
3. Stephen Bell, *Rebel, Priest and Prophet: A Biography of Dr. Edward McGlynn* (New York: The Devin-Adair Company, 1937), p. 232.
4. Pope John Paul II, *Brazil: Journey in the Light of the Eucharist* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul), p. 255.
5. Thomas More, *Utopia* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1955), pp. 34–35.
6. *Rerum Novarum*, #14.
7. John A. Ryan, *Distributive Justice* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916), p. 23.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 35–36, 37.
9. Subsequent papal encyclicals came to analyze political and socioeconomic issues from an international perspective.
10. *Laborem Exercens* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1981), #14, pp. 34–35.
11. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 67.
12. *Ibid.*