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Source: *Victorian Studies*, Winter, 1987, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Winter, 1987), pp. 235-252

Published by: Indiana University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3827665>

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John Plowright

POLITICAL ECONOMY AND CHRISTIAN POLITY: THE INFLUENCE OF HENRY GEORGE IN ENGLAND REASSESSED*

HENRY GEORGE WAS BORN IN PHILADELPHIA ON 2 SEPTEMBER 1839, AND DIED IN New York on 19 October 1897. In the course of his lifetime he passed from hardship through extreme poverty to a position of international fame (and infamy) as the advocate of the “single tax”: the doctrine that the state should tax away all economic rent — that is, the increment deriving from the use of the bare land (but not from improvements) — and abolish all other taxes.¹

Considered in simple material terms, this doctrine may be criticized from two opposed viewpoints: from the “right,” as systematic spoliation, and from the “left,” as tending to perpetuate the systematic spoliation of the mass by the non-landed owners of capital. Although I will examine George in these terms while assessing the impact of his thought in England, I will also contend that George is done an injustice when considered solely in such terms. Robert Skidelsky serves to show the serious distortion of George’s thought which arises from this failure; had he considered the full title of George’s *Progress and Poverty* (1880; the subtitle reads: *An Inquiry into the Cause of Industrial Depressions, and of the Increase of Want with Increase of Wealth. The Remedy*), he could not have assumed that George regarded material progress as either “automatic” or desirable in itself.² In short my aim is to point out that feature of George’s thought which John Dewey recognized as “too often ignored,” namely “his emphasis upon ideal factors of life, upon what are sometimes called the imponderables.” For it is, as Dewey appreciated, “a poor version of his ideas which insists only upon the material effect of increase of population in producing the material or monetary increment in

* The author wishes to express a general debt of gratitude to Derek Beales, David Cannadine, and Maurice Cowling, and thank them for specific comments on earlier drafts of this piece.

¹ Henry George, Jr., *The Life of Henry George* (London: William Reeves, 1900) remains the best life of George.

² See Robert Skidelsky, “1929-1931 Revisited,” *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History* 21 (1970), 6.

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the value of land.”³ Indeed, I seek to show that the ethical, and specifically Christian element in George’s work was in fact central to the thought and success of this self-taught and self-appointed “Prophet of San Francisco.” Only thus is it possible to understand how it was that George conceived himself, in 1897, to be choosing a martyr’s death.⁴

I

George’s impact upon reformist thought in England is hardly open to question. In April 1884 William Morris pronounced the prominence of “the land question at this hour” to be “in great part due to Mr. Henry George.”⁵ Subsequent analysis has tended merely to confirm this contemporary assessment. The Webbs believed “the wide circulation in Great Britain of . . . *Progress and Poverty* during the years” 1880 to 1882 “completely revolutionised” the land question and generally initiated “the new current of thought.”⁶ Edward Pease similarly held that *Progress and Poverty* gave an extraordinary impetus to the political thought of the time.⁷ J. A. Hobson considered George “to have exercised a more directly powerful formative and educative influence over English radicalism” between 1882 and 1897 “than any other man.”⁸ George Bernard Shaw not only recorded that his own “attention was first drawn to political economy as the science of social salvation by Henry George’s eloquence” but testified that “beyond all question” *Progress and Poverty* “had more to do with the Socialist revival” in the early eighties “than any other book.”⁹ Max Beer concurred in this view that it was “Henry George’s books and lectures” which “stimulated many of the younger generation of intellectuals and working men.”¹⁰ It was upon George’s “catchword ‘unearned increment’ much more than on Marx’s ‘surplus value’ ” that “the thinking of the English socialist movement was based,”

³ John Dewey, *John Dewey on Henry George and What Some Others Say* (New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1927), p. 4.

⁴ George consciously chose what he considered to be martyrdom for the sake of his cause when informed by doctors that his death would almost certainly result if he persisted in his New York mayoralty campaign. See George, Jr., pp. 594-597.

⁵ William Morris, “Henry George,” *Justice* 1 (5 April 1884), 4.

⁶ Sidney Webb and Beatrice Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism* (London: Longmans, 1894), pp. 361-362.

⁷ Edward R. Pease, *The History of the Fabian Society* (London: A. C. Fifield, 1916), p. 20.

⁸ J. A. Hobson, “The Influence of Henry George in England,” *Fortnightly Review*, n.s., 62 (July-December 1897), 844.

⁹ G. B. Shaw, “Memoranda” in Pease, p. 260.

¹⁰ Max Beer, *A History of British Socialism*, 2 vols. (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1920), II, 245.

R. C. K. Ensor has claimed.¹¹ More recently, A. M. McBriar and D. M. Ricci have reaffirmed Hobson's suggestion that the Fabian extension of the concept of rent to include the profits not only of land but also of capital was facilitated by the fact that the "idea of rent as a definitely social product emerges with tolerable frequency in George's writings."¹² Nor was George's direct influence confined to socialism. In 1937, Winston Churchill singled out George as the "solitary new teacher" admitted, albeit "very suspiciously," to the "mental parlours" of Victorian radicalism alongside Adam Smith, J. S. Mill, Richard Cobden, John Bright, and William Gladstone. This achievement was all the more remarkable because "Gladstonian Radicals are a very arrogant brood" and otherwise "not a chink, crack or crevice had been opened in their system of thought by half a century of shock or change."¹³

Other scholars have claimed that George's importance has been exaggerated. While allowing that George "must be reckoned as one of the formative influences of the 1880s," John Saville asserts that he should not be "regarded as the most important single cause of the new trend in ideas," arguing that Sidney Webb, Hobson, Pease, Beer, and the most important recent writers on George — C. A. Barker and E. P. Lawrence — have all exaggerated George's place in the history of British radicalism and socialism. They have neglected, Saville says, or insufficiently emphasized, "two general matters relating to George and his influence in Britain," namely, the extent to which he "entered British society at a point in time when the anti-landlord movement was" already "an integral part of both middle class and working class radicalism," and the extent to which his seeming acceptance of land nationalization with his "biting indictment of social conditions made George eminently acceptable to the early socialist movement."¹⁴ As Saville states elsewhere, it was "the anti-landlordism of George rather than the nostrum of the single-tax that appealed to British audiences."¹⁵

The passage of time is at least as liable to confuse as to facilitate our understanding of events, and Saville's attempt to deny that George was the most important single cause of the "new trend in ideas" contradicts not merely other recent scholarly assessments, but the judgement of informed and perceptive contemporaries of George who themselves largely embody that

¹¹ R. C. K. Ensor, *England 1870-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 334.

¹² Hobson, p. 842. See A. M. McBriar, *Fabian Socialism and British Politics, 1884-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), pp. 29-47; D. M. Ricci, "Fabian Socialism: A Theory of Rent as Exploitation," *Journal of British Studies* 9 (1969), pp. 105-120.

¹³ Winston S. Churchill, *Great Contemporaries* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1937), pp. 292-293.

¹⁴ John Saville, "Henry George and the British Labour Movement: A Select Bibliography with Commentary," *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History* 5 (1962), 18-22. See also C. A. Barker, *Henry George* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), and E. P. Lawrence, *Henry George in the British Isles* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1957).

¹⁵ John Saville, "Henry George and British Labor," *Science and Society* 24 (1960), 321.

very trend in ideas. In contradicting the Webbs, Hobson, Pease, and Beer, Saville in effect claims to know more about their intellectual origins than they knew themselves. Such a contention is dubious, especially because Saville acknowledges that Hobson and Beer, at least, possessed some appreciation “of the long history of agrarian radicalism in Britain before 1880” (Saville, “George and the British Labour Movement,” p. 18).

Hobson, in fact, was careful to stress the way in which “George, like other prophets, co-operated with the ‘spirit of the age.’” First, the British reception of *Progress and Poverty*, Hobson pointed out, was reinforced by the “gradually deepening depression” in agriculture. Second, the continuing growth of large industrial towns, along with rising standards of sanitation and other civic needs, was driving home to municipal reformers “a sense of conflict between the public interest of the towns and the private interests of the owners of town land.” Third, English conditions favoured George even more than those of America because English land was “vested in a smaller number of owners than any other country of equal population,” while nowhere else did “the vast majority of actual cultivators” possess “so slight a property or interest in the land they cultivate.” This afforded “a peculiarly effective presentment of the iniquity of landlordism, dramatically concentrated in a small class” and susceptible “to powerful concrete local illustration” (Hobson, p. 839).

By treating rural and urban aspects of the land issue as essentially one, moreover, George showed John Morley “how the town populations could be attracted to the question of land reform.”¹⁶ Joseph Chamberlain himself feared that the “wide circulation of such books as ‘Progress and Poverty’” and their “acceptance among the working classes” might lead to “theories as wild and methods as unjust” as those supported by George being “adopted as the creed of no inconsiderable portion of the electorate.”¹⁷

Some contemporaries found the proposals of George and the similar land nationalization plans of Alfred Russel Wallace “not only drastic but alarming in their scope and magnitude,” because “they were applied for the sake of a problematical gain the certainty of which they signally failed to demonstrate.”¹⁸ Walter Bagehot had warned that French misfortunes taught that “peasant proprietorship spreads not only the sense of property but a panic of property,” and H. M. Hyndman, Wallace, and above all George induced such a panic in the Chamberlainite radicals in the 1880s that they

¹⁶ Morley to Joseph Chamberlain, 7 January 1883, Chamberlain MSS, J.C. 5/54/474.

¹⁷ Joseph Chamberlain, “Labourers’ and Artisans’ Dwellings,” *Fortnightly Review*, n.s., 34 (July-December 1883), 762.

¹⁸ T. H. S. Escott, *The Radical Programme*, ed. D. A. Hamer (Brighton: Harvester, 1971), p. 55. See A. R. Wallace, “How to Nationalise the Land: A Radical Solution to the Irish Problem,” *Contemporary Review* 38 (November 1880), pp. 716-732, and Wallace, *Land Nationalisation: Its Necessity and Aims* (London: William Reeves, 1882).

sought to secure counter-revolution by means of a peasant proprietary and an extended franchise.¹⁹

II

George's conception of political economy ran counter to the utilitarian mainstream of classical economic thought. The Benthamite task "was to persuade the uneducated (who happened to be poor) of the essential rightness of classical economics."²⁰ So far from endorsing the plenty-producing "laws of economics," George recognized that, with the single exception of the Ricardian law of rent (and not all of that), conventional political economy inhibited the very progress he desired, albeit largely because Malthusianism legitimated the claim that material progress was circumscribed. Essentially, however, George's objection to Malthusianism, and to classical political economy in general, was ethical in character.

In the review of *Progress and Poverty* which George himself considered the best to have appeared at the time, the Reverend George Sarson recognized that political economy had "inherited that abandoned air of absolute finality which was once supposed to attach exclusively to the formularies of the clergy" so that it had become "generally regarded . . . as the 'dismal science.'" The Malthusian dogma that "the niggardliness of nature, not the injustice of society, is the cause of the penalty attached to over-population" inhibited practical legislative effort on behalf of the poor.²¹ Henry Rose made precisely the same point, explaining the popular reception of *Progress and Poverty* not only by reference to this widespread misconception of political economy, but to the strain to which religious faith had been subjected by Victorian scientific discovery:

Hitherto political economy had been little better than a scientific exposition of, and justification of, human selfishness. It had been allied with the art of slandering the Creator with a good grace. . . . Political economy had been something quite apart from the moral law, very much in the sense that the literal renderings of the scripture story of the Creation and the Flood had been something quite apart from modern scientific teaching in the domain of geology and of astronomy. Men were by implication, if not by direct teaching, required to believe the story of the Creation in the book of Genesis at the same time as they gave acceptance to geological and astronomical discovery. And equally, men by implication, if not by direct teaching, had been taught at least to refrain from questioning a

¹⁹ W. Bagehot, *The Collected Works of Walter Bagehot*, ed. N. St.-John Stevas, 15 vols. (London: The Economist, 1968), III, 315. H. M. Hyndman, *England For All: The Textbook of Democracy*, ed. C. Tsuzuki (Brighton: Harvester, 1973).

²⁰ P. F. Clarke, *Liberals and Social Democrats* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 6.

²¹ Rev. George Sarson, "Progress and Poverty," *The Modern Review* 4 (January 1883), 56-59, quoting J. S. Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, I, 187-190.

heartless and immoral political economy, which failed to enforce the equal rights of men to the land, which failed to give labour its place of priority in relation to capital, and which even went so far in direct antagonism against human laws and natural order as to make the very peopling of God's earth a curse. . . . All this was very heinous. But here was the book [*Progress and Poverty*] of a man who had not accepted as true all that he was told . . . and who made the grand discovery . . . of a political economy which is capable of being reconciled with our best perceptions of moral law.²²

Thus George's "political economy is the analogue of his religious thought" (Rose, p. 82).

George held that "the Malthusian doctrine parries the demand for reform, and shelters selfishness from question and from conscience by the interposition of an inevitable necessity."²³ In this it had become buttressed not only by the law of diminishing returns in agriculture "which put us to the mental confusion of denying the justice of the Creation" but also by social Darwinism, especially "analogies in the animal and vegetable kingdoms . . . to which . . . modern thought, in levelling distinctions between different forms of life, has given a greater and greater weight" (*Progress and Poverty*, p. 71). In short, George conceived himself to be confronted by an unholy trinity comprised of Malthusianism, classical political economy, and social Darwinism. In explicit contradiction to Mill's underwriting of Malthus, George affirmed his own faith "that the injustice of Society, not the niggardliness of nature is the cause of want and misery which the current theory attributes to overpopulation" (*Progress and Poverty*, p. 103). Malthusian theory is nothing more than "a gratuitous attribution to the laws of God of results which . . . really spring from the maladjustments of men" (*Progress and Poverty*, p. 109).²⁴

In George's view the institutionalized church, of which Malthus was a member, had abused its authority and was as culpable as the economic establishment, because "even the preachers of what passes for Christianity" were either so blind or so blasphemous as to present the Creator as condemning the masses to want.²⁵ There had been "no failure of Christianity," only a "failure . . . in the sort of Christianity that has been preached."²⁶ By exorcising Malthus the essentially ethical nature and scientific status of true political economy would be revealed. The important point is not that George engaged in economic theorising, but that his reason for so doing

²² Henry Rose, *Henry George: A Biographical, Anecdotal, and Critical Sketch* (London: William Reeves, 1884), pp. 44-45.

²³ George, *Progress and Poverty* (1880; London: Kegan Paul, 1906), p. 73.

²⁴ See also George, *Thou shalt not steal* (1890; rpt. ed. London: The Henry George Foundation of Great Britain, 1941), p. 3.

²⁵ George, *Social Problems* (London: Kegan Paul, 1884), pp. 96-97.

²⁶ George, *Thy Kingdom Come* (1889; rpt. ed. London: The United Committee for Taxation of Land Values, 1933), p. 11.

was that he believed it possible to show that economic truth conformed with, or was even identical with, Christian truth.

This point has largely escaped notice because George was initially somewhat circumspect and his mode of presentation belies his actual motivation. *Progress and Poverty*, his most celebrated work, is atypical of his output because its major part is George's attempt to confute orthodox political economy on its own terms. The fact that this argument is predicated upon ethical — and specifically Christian — philosophy, although more obvious in George's other writings, is only apparent in the later portions of *Progress and Poverty*, with the result that even avowed Georgians sometimes treat the economic and ethical arguments as independent of one another. Thus Anna George de Mille abridged *Progress and Poverty* in such a way that the last chapter of Book X and the Conclusion were not only shortened but placed as an Addendum to Books I to IX.²⁷ Such arrangements violated both the letter and the spirit of George's work as he believed that the science of political economy comprehended "the greater part of those vexed questions" which underlay not only politics, legislation, and social theories but also philosophy and religion.²⁸

According to George, just as each man can come to a knowledge of God and religious truth without the intervention of the priesthood, so each man can perceive economic truth without the assistance of "expert" economists. It is not only possible but desirable to dispense with both priesthood and pundits, because both possess a vested interest in the status quo. Because economic truth is at one with religious truth, moreover, true political economy serves as a natural theology by means of which the individual may come to believe or to recover lost faith. In "distinguishing what is essential from what is merely accidental," the believer will come to appreciate what is needful to personal and social salvation, and will distinguish this from what may be regarded as adiaphora or superfluous (*Political Economy*, pp. 4-5). A certain minimal material satisfaction is the prerequisite of religious striving, because it is not money but the love of money that is the root of all evil and that results in the doctrine of the "devil take the hindmost" (*Progress and Poverty*, p. 329). Pointing out that money is produced with a view to its exchange, not its consumption, George notes that "we always seek for its substance materials least subject to wear and decay while it is usually carefully guarded by whoever for the moment may be in its possession" (*Political Economy*, p. 382). This rather Marxian Freudian slip confirms that, for George, no stigma is attached to money as such, when used as the means to individual fulfil-

²⁷ George, *Progress and Poverty*, abridged by Anna George de Mille (New York: Vanguard Press, 1926), p. 196.

²⁸ George, *The Science of Political Economy* (1897; rpt. ed. London: The Henry George Foundation of Great Britain, 1932), p. 1.

ment, but the use of money results in the alienation of one individual from another and the individual from God when idolized as an end in itself. More “clearly than in any other science” political economy “enables us to see . . . that the government of the universe is a moral government having its foundation in justice” or, to put it another way, “that the Lord our God is a just God” (*Political Economy*, pp. 350-351). George was thus not simply offering social salvation but religious redemption.

His proselytizing fervour was that of the convert, moreover, for through writing *Progress and Poverty* George recovered his own faith. George had received a strict upbringing in the Episcopal Church, but in his adolescence “he had come to reject almost completely the forms of religion, and with the forms . . . belief in the life hereafter.” Instead, he “inclined towards materialism” (George, Jr., p. 103). He later attended a Methodist place of worship and married a devout Catholic, but “it was not until” he pursued those inquiries which resulted in *Progress and Poverty* “that . . . immortality became a fixed belief,” for out of that inquiry came “the conviction that it was not by God’s will, but because of violation of God’s ordinance that men suffered involuntary poverty” (George, Jr., pp. 134, 252).

Three documents bear witness to this crucial spiritual transformation. First, there is the evidence of *Progress and Poverty* itself. In the “Conclusion: The Problem of Individual Life,” George not only attributes the general decline in religious belief to Malthusianism, classical political economy, and social Darwinism, but testifies to the revival of his own faith through his inquiries (*Progress and Poverty*, pp. 395-399). Second, there is George’s letter to Charles Nordhoff of 21 December 1879, which similarly records that out “of the train of thought which is set forth in that book [*Progress and Poverty*] . . . a faith” had come (George, Jr., p. 329). Third, there is George’s handwritten postscript in his letter to the Reverend T. Dawson of 1 February 1883, which tells of the “vision” or “call” of “religion” which “impelled” him “to write *Progress and Poverty*” and “sustained” him thereafter (George, Jr., pp. 311-312).

George’s God, though not conceived as necessarily personal nor possessing any positive shape or form, is nevertheless something more than an abstraction and engenders neither asceticism nor quietism (George, Jr., p. 545). The life and institutions of Moses represent a protest against the blasphemy, “preached oft-times even from Christian pulpits,” that want and suffering are ordained and unalterable.²⁹ God gave the land to the people; therefore its appropriation as private property constitutes a robbery and an iniquity, as it represents an abuse of God-given moral choice. George purports simply to free moral choice from material necessity, for it is the business of

²⁹ George, *Moses* (1884; rpt. ed. London: The Henry George Foundation of Great Britain, 1938), p. 13.

government “to secure to men those equal and inalienable rights with which the Creator has endowed them . . . not . . . to make men virtuous or religious” (*Social Problems*, pp. 225-227). Yet “a truly Christian civilization” will not be possible until the “fear of poverty” has been dispelled and “the mad struggle for mere animal existence has ceased” (*Social Problems*, p. 95). In this sense religious faith is both the means by which George’s political economy will be implemented and the end to which it is to be directed, because

the only power by which such a state of society can be attained and preserved is that which the framers of the scheme I speak of generally ignore, even when they do not directly antagonize — a deep, definite, intense religious faith, so clear, so burning as to utterly melt away the thought of self — a general moral condition such as that which the Methodists declare, under the name of “sanctification,” to be individually possible, in which the dream of pristine innocence should become reality, and man, so to speak, should again walk with God.

(*Social Problems*, p. 113).

George’s two main doctrinal statements are, first, that man, not God, is responsible for poverty, because the “power of falling lower” is necessarily involved in the God-given “power of rising higher” (*Thy Kingdom Come*, p. 5). Second, it follows from this that man possesses the capacity to eradicate poverty. Because George was inspired by his personal spiritual regeneration, because he sought to sustain his crusade by means of religious sentiment, and because the end to which he worked was the creation of material conditions permitting all to grapple with the spiritual problems of the individual life, Saville is mistaken in writing that George helped to undermine “the Victorian belief that social reform was impossible save through individual regeneration” (“George and the British Labour Movement,” p. 21). Similarly, in writing that George, in *The Condition of Labour* (1891), “took advantage of the fact that he . . . based his thinking, as much as anyone else, on religious assumptions,” Barker appears insensitive to the fact that George, much more than anyone else, consciously based his thinking on religious assumptions (Barker, p. 573). “No estimate of the man will be approximately trustworthy which does not fully take . . . into account” the fact that George was “a Christian” (Rose, p. 82). Further, “the essence of . . . George’s economics is ethical” and “carries with it a profound belief in an All-Maker” (George, Jr., p. 578). As George himself put it, “our postulates are . . . the fundamental teachings of the Christian faith.”³⁰

George claimed that in *The Condition of Labour* he aimed “to make a clear, brief, explanation of our principles, to show their religious character, and to draw a line between us and the socialists” (George, Jr., p. 567). It should therefore come as no surprise to learn that his antipathy to socialism

³⁰ George, *The Condition of Labour* (1891; London: Land and Liberty Press, 1947), p. 1.

was fundamentally religious in character, for socialism fails “to see the order and symmetry of natural law, it fails to recognize God” and thus “Socialism tends towards Atheism” (*Condition of Labour*, p. 56). For this reason “the poor timid university socialists” have failed to recognize George’s claim that his “beliefs tend towards, nay, are indeed, the only beliefs consistent with a firm and reverent faith in God.”³¹

To be fair, even intimates sometimes misunderstood George’s Christian commitment. Some of his friends tried to discourage him from considering Herbert Spencer’s Synthetic Philosophy when he was preparing to write *A Perplexed Philosopher* (George, Jr., p. 569). They failed to appreciate that, to George’s mind, Spencer’s offence in repudiating the principle that God had made the land for all the people equally, consisted not simply in his denying what he had hitherto asserted, but that, “with his later philosophy, he had allowed materialism to take the place of God” (George, Jr., p. 328).

As early as 1879, in the previously cited letter to Nordhoff, George had announced his desire to dissect “this materialistic philosophy which, with its false assumption of science, passes current with so many” (George, Jr., p. 329). Spencer’s betrayal provided George with the ideal opportunity: the anti-materialist of the “religiously-minded” *Social Statics* (1850), cited with only slightly qualified approval in *Progress and Poverty* (pp. 256-259), had become the foremost representative of that spurious scientific authority, the effect of whose “blank materialism” was to impress the common mind with “a vague belief that modern science has proved the idea of God to be an ignorant superstition and the hope of a future life a vain delusion” (*A Perplexed Philosopher*, p. 236). In George’s eyes Spencer had literally turned devil’s advocate.

III

Given the nature of the appeal of George’s gospel, it is difficult to share John Rae’s surprise that *Progress and Poverty* “created an army of apostles, and was enthusiastically circulated, like the testament of a new dispensation.”³² As Hobson put it, the “spirit of humanitarian and religious appeal which suffuses *Progress and Poverty* wrought powerfully upon a large section” of “typical English moralists,” especially “free trading Radical dissenters”: men of “grit and character, largely self-educated, keen citizens” of the “lower-middle or upper-working class” (Hobson, pp. 841-842). Indeed, the

³¹ George, *A Perplexed Philosopher* (1886; rpt. ed. London: The Henry George Foundation of Great Britain, 1937), p. 183; *The Condition of Labour*, p. 56.

³² John Rae, *Contemporary Socialism* (London: William Isbister, 1884), pp. 404-405.

ethical and religious character of *Progress and Poverty* seemed likely to endear Georgeism to the Gladstonian Liberal party. George's single-tax crusade assumed the characteristic form of those "great political, semi-religious agitations of the nineteenth century" which were "not only a bid for independence and power on the part of men who had been denied both by the old [aristocratic] system," but "also an attempt to relate the secular to the eternal."³³ In this context the religiosity of George's passion for social reform deserves emphasis: his indignation was not only righteous but religious.

Perhaps Gladstone wanted power for some purpose other than itself, and his mode of operation was not necessitated simply by the nature of his party.³⁴ Gladstonian crusades were a means of providing moral cohesion for the nation through the parliamentary process and perhaps also an effort to forestall incipient socialism or, at least, the advent of overtly class-oriented democratic politics.³⁵ Georgeism was attuned to Gladstonian Liberalism because it represented an avowedly "democratic" response to the dissolution of the national moral community, including a recognition of the need to fill the void left by the failure of the Church's moral authority. Whichever concern was uppermost in Gladstone's mind, Georgeism was adaptable to his aims. Indeed, insofar as Gladstone followed George in equating socialism with atheism their aims were identical. The writer W. H. Mallock appreciated the crusading character of Georgeism but claimed that George used "the combined excitement of religious and of class feelings" to cloak "the naked passion of covetousness." The result was thus the opposite of that desired by Gladstone, for while both were "intelligible to the lowest class of readers," George's doctrine possessed the "double danger" of exciting "their worst passions, by a false appeal to their best."³⁶

The Left, too, found George two-faced and his doctrines double-edged. Morris confessed his fear "that the capitalists," in their anxiety "to save the proceeds of their own still worse methods of plunder, would . . . throw the landlords overboard . . . and . . . pit Mr. George as the reasonable and moral reformer against the unreasonable and immoral revolutionists" (Morris, p. 41). This fear was allayed while George was popularly identified

³³ G. S. R. Kitson Clark, "Introduction" to R. T. Shannon, *Gladstone and the Bulgarian Agitation 1876* (Brighton: Harvester, 1975), pp. xxi-xxii.

³⁴ This view runs contrary to A. B. Cooke and J. R. Vincent, *The Governing Passion: Cabinet Government and British Politics 1885-86* (Brighton: Harvester, 1974), on Gladstone and power, and contrary to D. A. Hamer, *Liberal Politics in the Age of Gladstone and Rosebery: A Study in Leadership and Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), on his party politics.

³⁵ M. Cowling, 1867: *Disraeli, Gladstone and Revolution: The Passing of the Second Reform Bill* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), pp. 28-29.

³⁶ W. H. Mallock, "Art. II — *Progress and Poverty: an inquiry into the cause of Industrial Depression, and the Increase of Want with Increase of Wealth. The Remedy.* By Henry George, London, 1882," *Quarterly Review* 155 (January 1883), 74.

with the socialists, and the middle class as a whole remained aloof. However, the Social Democratic paper *Justice*, Morris personally, and socialists generally became disillusioned with George for three reasons: his alleged success in “arbitrarily excluding” American Socialists “from the Congress of the United Labour Party,” his “furious attack upon the Chicago Anarchists,” and his “political intrigues” which benefitted “the Democratic party and President Cleveland.”³⁷ George’s chances of gaining support among the more cautious members of the middle and working classes improved correspondingly.

By the close of 1888 *Justice* conceived it to be “the duty of the Social Democratic Federation and of all Socialists in Great Britain to oppose Mr. Henry George with a resolute and uncompromising hostility,” because he was fast becoming “the salaried and befeasted lackey of the plundering capitalist class,” deserted by the workers as a class traitor, and befriended, “with two or three exceptions,” by “hard-fisted money-grabbers and canting middle-class sermonisers of the baser sort.” The single tax was denounced as a “burden-shifting trick which . . . would benefit the capitalists without helping the workers in the least.”³⁸

Saville takes the George-Hyndman “Single Tax v. Social Democracy” Debate of 1889 as marking the fatal parting of the ways between Georgeites and Socialists (p. 25). Hyndman stressed the appeal of George’s proposals to the bourgeoisie, arguing that the established economic rent of sixty million pounds per annum used to reduce “the general taxation upon industry . . . would go . . . into the pockets of the great capitalists,” so that “the only people who would benefit would be the Rothschilds, the Barings, the Chamberlains, the Mundellas” and such like. In short, Hyndman regarded George as essentially “a reactionary and not a revolutionist.”³⁹

The same point is made, albeit more prosaically, in the account of the debate in *Justice*, which recorded that “the anti-socialist element was” well-represented “in the higher priced seats” while socialism was strongest in “the galleries and . . . the back of the hall where the democratic shilling held sway.” This account conflicts with the *Verbatim Report* in one small particular. Hyndman voiced the opinion that “the Capitalists and middle classes” comprised “the majority of the audience” (*Verbatim Report*, p. 18), but according to *Justice* “it was in the higher-priced seats . . . that there was the most sparse attendance.”⁴⁰ But even if they were unsure as to the precise location

³⁷ William Morris, “Henry George’s Collapse,” *Justice* 5 (10 March 1888), 1.

³⁸ “The ‘Single Tax’ Fraud Again,” *Justice* 5 (22 December 1888), 1.

³⁹ *Verbatim Report of the Debate in St. James’s Hall, July 2nd 1889. Single Tax v. Social Democracy: which will most benefit the People? Between Henry George and H. M. Hyndman* (London: The “Justice” Printery, 1889), pp. 8-9, 12.

⁴⁰ “Single-Tax v. Social Democracy,” *Justice* 6 (6 July 1889), 3.

and numbers of the middle-class audience, the socialists were united in their belief that George was playing to it.

The disowning of George by the Socialists helped open the way for the Liberals to look with increased favour upon him. George's Free Tradism and internationalism also provided common ground. Indeed, these aspects of his creed were so pronounced that E. G. Fitzgibbon implied the single tax was secondary to them.⁴¹ While personally neither claiming nor repudiating the "socialist" label, moreover, George appealed to the Liberal left wing by his claim to be outflanking socialism.⁴²

Skidelsky has argued that "British socialism . . . was the product of the success of capitalism not its failure" (p. 6). George himself argued that socialism remained conceptually constrained by the tradition of classical political economy it nominally challenged. Thus the socialist nostrum of nationalization was less a response to the inner contradictions of capitalism as such, than to the socialist adoption and reduction to absurdity of capitalist economics:

Socialism in its narrow sense — the socialism that would have the State absorb capital and abolish competition — is the scheme of men who . . . have . . . fallen into fallacies elaborated by the economists of a totally different school, who have taught that capital is the employer and sustainer of labor, and have striven to confuse the distinction between property in land and property in labor-products. Their scheme is that of men who, while revolting from the heartlessness and hopelessness of the "orthodox political economy," are yet entangled in its fallacies and blinded by its confusions. Confounding "capital" with "means of production," and accepting the dictum that "natural wages" are the least on which competition can force the laborer to live, they essay to cut a knot they do not see how to unravel, by making the State the sole capitalist and employer, and abolishing competition.

(*Protection or Free Trade*, pp. 325-326).

George asserted that "there is in reality no conflict between labor and capital: the true conflict is between labor and monopoly" (*Protection or Free Trade*, p. 327). Even in industrial disputes it should not "be forgotten who are the real parties pitted against each other. It is not labour and capital. It is labourers on the one side and the owners of land on the other" (*Progress and Poverty*, p. 223). In this context socialist criticism of George only reassured the controllers of industrial and finance capital that George's attack on landed property rights did not endanger their own. George himself insisted that rather than "weakening and confusing the idea of property" he sought to "surround it with stronger sanctions," and instead "of lessening the incentive to the production of wealth" he sought to "make it more powerful by making the reward more certain" (*Social Problems*, p. 115).

⁴¹ E. G. Fitzgibbon, *Essence of "Progress and Poverty" extracted from the American of Henry George, and done into and dealt with in plain English* (London: W. Swan Sonnenschein and Co., 1884), p. 3.

⁴² George, *Protection or Free Trade* (London: Kegan Paul, 1886), p. 324n.

In the course of criticizing *Progress and Poverty*, Arnold Toynbee made his celebrated confession that the middle classes had sinned grievously against the working classes; whether forgiven or not, the middle classes should devote their lives to service.⁴³ Although George echoed Giuseppe Mazzini's address to "working men brothers," the tone, resonance, and purport of his remarks resembled Toynbee's as they were pitched, and pitched successfully, to precisely the same middle-class audience. Thus he appealed to "sympathy" not "selfishness," calling upon men not "to demand their own rights so much as . . . to secure the rights of others more helpless." The "idea of the Incarnation" embodied this, the best means of social improvement. This was so because the idea "of the God voluntarily descending to the help of men" contained for George "a deeper truth than perhaps even the Churches teach" in that historically "the deliverers, the liberators, the advancers of humanity, have always been those who were moved by the sight of injustice and misery rather than those spurred by their own suffering." To the extent that men had been "deprived of their natural rights" he held that they also lost "their power to regain them" and thus have "been freed and elevated rather by the efforts and sacrifices of those to whom fortune has been more kind than by their own strength" (*Social Problems*, pp. 117-118).

This doctrine of social redemption could stand as the classic justification of the classic mode of Liberal political action: providing religious sanctions for secular purposes, with the ruling class continuing in power not because of their material wealth, but because "sympathy" in some way conferred spiritual authority upon them. They could offer limited material benefits to the down-trodden so that their spiritual life might be similarly illuminated. But the working classes could not be trusted to strive for their own social redemption because they would be interested in wealth for its own sake and accordingly refuse to accept that the material benefits accruing to their "liberators" occurred incidentally or as the means of permitting the bestowal of a greater degree of spiritual freedom. Hence the formula of "government by means of the middle for the working classes."⁴⁴

IV

What distinguished George's position from that of classic liberalism was the openness of his conviction that the material and the ideal were di-

⁴³ Arnold Toynbee, "*Progress and Poverty*": A criticism of Mr. H. George (London: Kegan Paul, 1883), p. 53.

⁴⁴ John Stuart Mill, "The reorganisation of the Reform Party," *London and Westminster Review* 32 (1839), pp. 475.

rectly connected, so that religious potential was grounded in material well-being. Although political economy “takes direct cognisance only of . . . the selfish instincts, yet in doing so it includes the basis of all higher qualities,” because “the development of the nobler part of human nature is powerfully modified by material conditions, if it does not absolutely depend upon them.” The laws of political economy therefore “control the mental and moral as well as the physical status of humanity.”⁴⁵

For George Christianity remained vital, in part because of its “essential idea of the equality of men.” George’s Pelagianism is a corollary of this view. The “deep wrongs in the present constitution of society . . . are not wrongs inherent in the constitution of man” (*Social Problems*, p. 77). George was representative of the “Victorian frame of mind” in denying the doctrine of original sin. For Charles Kingsley, for example, “the essential idea of Protestantism was not the corruption of man by original sin,” but “the dignity and divinity of man as God made him.”⁴⁶ Similarly, Toynbee conceived the Fall as “a possibility of good not realised,” and Winwood Reade’s *Martyrdom of Man* (1872) represents a popularized, secularized inversion of the doctrine of original sin — the present generation suffers for the sake of future generations, rather than because of sinfulness inherent in the human condition.⁴⁷ As Rose notes, George’s remarkable “faith in the unselfishness of human nature, when placed in the right conditions . . . has been one secret of [his] great moral influence” (Rose, p. 47). But although George’s faith in man was one secret of his great moral influence with the mass, there is good reason to suppose that it also accounts, in large part, for his failure to impress Gladstone, because Gladstone believed in “a degeneracy of man, in the Fall — in sin — in the intensity and virulence of sin” (quoted in Clarke, p. 7).

George, who had “made it the work of his priesthood to correlate and unify political economy and the maxims of State government with Christianity,” had “singled out Mr. Gladstone for special admiration” (Rose, pp. 83, 91) and sent him a presentation copy of *Progress and Poverty* (George, Jr., p. 323). But although Gladstone read the book, George looked to him in vain. Considerations militating against Gladstone accepting George — the single tax rendered Free Trade in land and Gladstonian Irish land legislation redundant, and presented Cobden’s theories as inadequate — would appear to be outweighed by the susceptibility of Georgeism to Gladstonian ethical presen-

⁴⁵ George, *The Study of Political Economy* (London: The United Committee for Taxation of Land Values, 1936), pp. 1-2.

⁴⁶ Charles Kingsley, *Yeast* (1851), quoted in W. E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 418.

⁴⁷ Arnold Toynbee, *Lectures on the Industrial Revolution of the Eighteenth Century in England, Popular Addresses, Notes and other Fragments Together with a Reminiscence by Lord Milner* (London: Longmans, 1919), p. 263. Winwood Reade, *The Martyrdom of Man* (London: Trübner, 1872). See George, *Progress and Poverty*, p. 339 n.l.

tation.⁴⁸ However, while true to the spirit of Gladstonian Liberalism insofar as its “governing passion” was “virtuous” but not spontaneous, Georgeism was not, despite Churchill’s claims, personally acceptable to Gladstone. Because of their difference over the issue of original sin, Gladstone could not accept George’s version of Christian ethics.

It is within this context of religious ethics that George’s refusal to compensate landowners must be understood. Despite important genuflections toward gradualist tactical considerations, that refusal was in fact a necessary consequence of the ethical argument underlying his entire work. In appropriating God’s bounty, the owners of private property in land had sinned against the rest of humanity, so that compensating landowners for the reappropriation of economic rent would not only compound a wrong but condone a sin. The question was one of morality and, as such, admitted of no compromise — including such compromises as Gladstone’s own land reform initiatives proposed. This issue illustrates that, so far from using religion to legitimate desired radical reform, George’s radicalism arose as the necessary consequence of his theology. Although Gladstone chose to impugn George by subscribing to Giffen’s repudiation of the economic argument of *Progress and Poverty*, it seems reasonable to suppose that differing conceptions of Christianity represented the real bar between the two men.⁴⁹ Indeed, in Gladstone’s eyes George’s “Christianity” undermined the intellectual foundation upon which true religion rests, for without the Fall there is no need for Christ’s Crucifixion.

Georgeism seems to have enjoyed greater success among the New Liberals, although the exact nature and extent of that success remain open to question. Offer’s thesis that Georgeism “proved to be . . . a destructive worm in the apple of the New Liberalism” must be viewed in the light of Churchill’s remark that “Mr. Henry George” is “not Mr. Lloyd George by any manner of means!”⁵⁰ It may be that the New Liberals were better disposed towards George than Gladstone was because their self-consciously progressive perspective encouraged them to make a false distinction between George’s appeals to class and to conscience, emphasizing the former at the latter’s expense. The New Liberals asserted that the Land Issue, the point where “Liberal tradition and the Socialist movement converge,” allowed “the disciples of Henry George” to “make common cause with the disciples of Richard Cobden” (F.

⁴⁸ See D. Read, *England 1869-1914: The Age of Urban Democracy* (London: Longmans, 1979), p. 293. See also *Progress and Poverty*, pp. 229-231; *Social Problems*, pp. 150-151; and *Protection or Free Trade*, pp. 347-348.

⁴⁹ W. E. Gladstone to Robert Giffen, *The Progress of the Working Classes in the Last Half Century* (London: The Statistical Society, 1884), p. 2.

⁵⁰ A. Offer, *Property and Politics 1870-1914: Landownership, Law, Ideology and Urban Development in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 403. Churchill, p. 292.

W. Hirst quoted in Clarke, p. 82). Georgeism was susceptible to such an analysis, moreover, because while George's "appeal is more usually to individual than to social rights," his theory encompasses these "two widely different and philosophically inconsistent bases" (Hobson, p. 842). As material self-interest encouraged the adoption and propagation of George's economic doctrines, the temptation was increasingly strong (because linked to the escalating fiscal needs of the State) and the flesh increasingly weak (particularly because the changing complexion of the Liberal Party rendered its landed element increasingly impotent).⁵¹ Georgeism could thus accommodate the New Liberal shift in emphasis epitomized by the statement that although "man cannot live by bread alone" neither can "man . . . live without bread," an argument symptomatic of the subordination of what J. R. Vincent has called the Gladstonian "emotional subsistence level" to naked subsistence politics.⁵²

For George institutionalized Christianity, orthodox or classical political economy, and accredited pseudo-scientific authority were all intellectually suspect whenever they gave credence to the morally reprehensible doctrines of Malthusianism, the "iron law of wages," and social Darwinism, all of which he criticized for teaching that social improvement was scarcely possible. George regarded these formulations as the self- or class-interested perversions of a great truth: the fundamental identity of Christ's Gospel with "true, scientific" political economy, which accommodated the material progress requisite for moral improvement, or at least for the exercise of moral choice.

It is tempting to explain George's thought either as an ideology fitted to the needs of Victorian industrial and finance capital, or as a well-intentioned but misguided personal theology. The first explains too much, by discounting George's religion as rhetoric, while the second explains too little, by giving George the dubious benefit of our own religious doubts. As Mallock observed, "Mr. George's vindication of God's ways is on par with his vindication of his own scheme for amending them" (Mallock, p. 74). These two elements of George's thought — the ethical and the economic — must both be taken into account: they stand or fall together.

In the history of economic thought, George's reputation has fallen very low indeed, meriting little more than a footnote.⁵³ In purely economic terms this seems just. George's understanding of classical political economy,

⁵¹ H. J. Perkin, "Land Reform and Class Conflict in Victorian Britain," in *The Victorians and Social Protest: A Symposium*, ed. J. Butt and I. F. Clarke (Newton Abbott: David and Charles, 1973), pp. 177-217, 235-239.

⁵² David Lloyd George, *Better Times* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1910), p. 55; J. R. Vincent, *Pollbooks: How Victorians Voted* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 45.

⁵³ William J. Barber, *A History of Economic Thought* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 214n.

like that of many of his admirers, was superficial. Although generally impressed with Ricardo's theory of rent, for example, he appears not to have realized that it rested upon the same proposition as the Malthusian theory of population which he reviled. In addition, George was seemingly oblivious to the fact that during that very period when his popularity was at its height, the "marginalist revolution" taking place in economics was, among other things, extending Ricardo's rent theory beyond land (Barber, pp. 163-221).

As I have argued, however, George's real significance lies outside the field of economics, and can only be appreciated by placing his ethically inspired economic thought in the broader cultural context of the conflict between science and religion. George belongs to that tradition of thinkers — Carlyle, Morris, Ruskin, Hobson, Tolstoy, and Gandhi — who have resisted the trend to regard economic thought as a body of scientific knowledge. Even in this company George is something of the odd man out: while the others directed their criticism towards industrialization, he set his face instead against the alleged iniquity underpinning an older economic order. Moreover, whereas they sought to "humanize" economics, his aim was nothing less than to "theologize" it. Ironically, what ultimately rendered George a figure of central significance for many contemporaries and of marginal importance for most of posterity was precisely this endeavour to predicate political economy upon Christianity.

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