

# Human Rights and the Missing Link

by George Ticehurst

**T**he Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 10th December 1948 has been receiving quite a lot of attention recently. This is partly because of its own half-centenary and of its European version shortly to be incorporated into British law. What is also being sought is "fairer access to justice in areas affecting fundamental human rights" according to the *London Times*, (23 Feb 1999).

The thirty Articles that list these rights are drawn from the Declaration's own preamble which recognizes "the inherent dignity and the equal and unalienable rights of all members of the human family [as] the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world". The list ranges from the right to life, liberty of the person, personal and family privacy; to freedom of movement, thought, religion, expression, assembly, to work, to leisure; to ownership of property; to a standard of living, of health and of education, and to take part in the cultural life of the community.

Fine phrases; sound social teaching, mostly taken for granted in our own liberal democracy. Yet

for very many millions of people there is a great gulf fixed between the right to life and the enjoyment of many of the other rights listed. There is a blank space in this list, a missing link which might be de-

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scribed in the words of Cardinal Hume in the *Times* (8/12/98) as "the right to a life worthy of the name human".

How can life worthy of the name human be sustained, without access to land that alone sustains life? Land, and all its natural resources, was produced by no man, cost nothing to produce and no more of it can be produced. Land, and its resources, can therefore never be called the property of any one person or group of persons in the sense of "owning things" as is the case with any other form of property. Such things are by definition man-made, have a cost and are reproducible at will. It would seem that Article 17 should have explicitly excluded land and its natural resources (that include air, air waves, sea, seabed minerals and such sources of natural power as fossil fuels), from the category of property.

If land and all its natural resources belong to no one person

or group of persons, they must belong to all humankind, currently numbering six billion and rising, and to the generations not yet born. Land is thereby a "common". Its uses contribute to the common good, rightfully to be shared amongst all. This right should therefore become an addition to the list of human rights, placed directly after Art. 3, the right to life. It would read: "the right to share in the earth's natural resources".

But how can land and all its natural resources possibly be shared by everyone? Here, Georgists have the answer that is so desperately needed. For the privilege of being title holder, an owner of land would pay annually to the community an economic rent, levied as a percentage of the land value at optimum permitted use, and in its unimproved state. Such a levy cannot be passed on to the consumer, as economists of all persuasions, in a rare show of unanimity, agree. Land value can be simply assessed (it doesn't move or disappear from the accounts); recorded (it is measurable); revised (its use, hence its value, modifies and changes over the years); publicised in full (from up-to-date Land Register information); and, quickly and unavoidably collected. The rent of the Earth is a bounty to be enjoyed by everyone.

It needs to be kept in mind that our present laws on land and property ownership have been developed over the centuries by the ruling elites and powers of the times. This in so in Britain as much as in Africa's exclusive tribal culture or South America's contemptuous expropriation tradition; by East European peasant serfdom or West European slave trading; by North American expansion onto Indian lands or Oriental oppressive landlordism. It may well be that, with the spread of information and travel technologies, these days of economic and serial exploitation are coming to an end, and the silent majorities are at last feeling their strength.

The Christian Churches in their social teachings have long avoided the vital distinction between the ownership of land as private property and the ownership of all other forms of private property, no doubt for very good reasons of their own down the ages. They have relied instead on strong exhortation to land owners on the duties of stewardship, and on strong anathemas on those land owners who violently, in some cases legally, evict and drive indigenous peoples from their lands, with little or no regard for their welfare or fate.

Later 19th and 20th centuries' Christian teachings still do not make this distinction. They do edge towards (*continued on page 28*)

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(continued from page 21) it in, for example, their somewhat recondite language about "the universal destination of material goods" and that "the individual ownership of goods are subservient" to the general right of their common use. This language sends no clear message to those urging change. It still treats both land and man-made goods as property that can be privately owned. It looks like an official cop-out.

Can the Church any longer afford to ignore the effects of the pressure of demand from great and increasingly well informed, mobile populations living on the same amount of land there ever has been, a large proportion of the most fertile and habitable of which is owned by relatively few people in monopoly positions? It is very much our practical business as Christians to join with others in facing this challenge. The issue needs to be grasped and backed more explicitly by the Churches in their universal role, identifying a universal moral problem, having a universal potential solution with a variety of local applications. We need a clear trumpet call, a moral leadership that can only come from the Churches, around which all those of good will can rally in the cause of the common good.

All other rights fall into place when the natural right to share in the earth's natural resources is placed immediately after the right to life. The issue is political, but no more so than the challenges of the prophets down the ages, and of our Lord at Nazareth, on landownership, slavery and debt (Leviticus 25). It is time, as it is also our duty, to re-think how we can "shape and use Creation according to the Creator's mind" in the task of eliminating continuing, involuntary poverty and of building "the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world." GJ

**H**ere is the answer, the only true answer: if men lack bread it is not God that has not done His part in providing it. If men willing to labor are cursed with poverty, it is not that the storehouse that God owes men has failed; that the daily supply He has promised for the daily wants of His children is not here in abundance. It is, that impiously violating the benevolent intentions of their Creator, men have made land private property, and thus given into the exclusive ownership of the few the provision that a bountiful Father has made for all.

— Henry George, *The Condition of Labor*