

# The Sacred Rule

## How to Remove the Globe from Globalisation

Fred Harrison

ACCORDING to this year's UN Development Programme's report, on present trends it will take 130 years before the world is free of hunger. On the current rate of progress, we will miss the target of halving the number of people in extreme poverty – defined as living on less than \$1 a day – by 2015. This is not "progress": it is a confession of institutionalised failure, argues Fred Harrison. But behind those failing institutions are doctrines that must be flawed, in some critical way. In short, our economic and political paradigm is directing us down a road that is a treadmill.

**FRED HARRISON's**  
*essay is based on a speech  
delivered at the Plater  
College, Oxford, Summer  
School conference on An  
Inter-faith Perspective on  
Globalisation in August.*

Globalisation is the catch phrase now used to summarise people's dissatisfaction.

It is generally taken to mean the greater integration of the world's markets through free trade and the liberalisation of finance, and the deregulation of public utilities; its visible form is said to be the increasingly international reach of communications.

In fact, claims the author, globalisation is something more profound than the mere convergence of commercial organisation and electronic innovation. It is a process that originated four centuries ago in England, driven by an agenda that needs to be understood if we are to make sense of the failures that lead to people demonstrating on the streets when the leaders of the G8 meet, or when the IMF convenes a conference.

**G**LOBALISATION is internally structured to achieve the following outcome: it is an exercise in extracting the taxable income produced by other countries, to enrich Europe and North America. In the colonial era, that income was extracted in its raw form, as natural resources. To continue the process in post-colonial conditions, it was necessary to devise more subtle methods. That is why it was necessary to locate the liberalisation of financial markets at the centre of so-called economic "reform".

The taxable income of any country – its net income, after paying for all the costs of production – has a precise economic definition: it is the rent that people pay for the use of land and natural resources. *If that one simple fact is not understood*, there is no prospect of identifying policies that will correct the great problems of our age.

Democracy and capitalism are seriously defective. They are associated with abiding problems which no amount of income redistribution or government regulation seem to be able to solve. Witness, for example, the failure of Britain's Welfare State – despite 50 years of massive income redistribution in the last half of the 20th century, the gaps between rich and poor continue to widen.<sup>1</sup>

The terms of both the political process and the creation and exchange of wealth need to be re-negotiated. This is the enormous challenge for all of us. But if the many disputing parties are to engage in this re-negotiation, we need a neutral space within which to work towards common goals. This re-negotiation needs to be on the basis of certain non-negotiable principles.

Our religious leaders may serve as honest brokers. But first, in this largely secular age, in the West, and given the deep-seated religious emotions displayed in the political conflicts of the East, the faiths of the world need to come to terms with their responsibilities. The prize is an enormous one: an inter-denominational mission that could be the catalyst for global harmony. What are the qualifications required of an honest broker in the current globalised conflict?

WE NEED a neutral referee. We need rules within which we may discuss the terms of our future. People must feel they will not be arbitrarily disadvantaged, that their vital interests will be respected and protected. That referee has to be able to do two things: First, empathise with the secular forms of what I shall call love and labour – that is, the freedom-in-association brand of politics; and of value-creating economics; and secondly, the referee must be independent; guided by coherent principles that enable others to feel confidence in the ability to adjudicate with wisdom and fairness.

**Quest for  
a neutral  
space**

- Who, or what, is both within, our material and social worlds but also outside it?
- Who or what, can stand apart from the controversial issues, understand the problems and take a global view of what needs to be done?
- Who or what, has the independent knowledge base to address the core problems that challenge humanity?

The leaders of our religions, drawing on their theologies, are uniquely qualified to play this role of referee. They can provide

1. *the spiritual wisdom* that enables people to take the holistic views that span generations; and
2. *the neutral space* within which to meet in congregation, a space of sanctuary from the world beset with seemingly intractable problems.

Here, in that spiritual space – which locates us on neutral, that is common, terrain, and which removes the globe from contention – we may safely explore both the problems, and the realistic solutions.

### **The impact of conflicts over territory**

THE SINGLE biggest problem in the world today is conflict over the possession and use of land. This is the primary source of tension between nation-states over territorial sovereignty. It is also the basis of inter-personal conflicts and injustices. Lurking behind the great disputes that fill our newspapers every day, is the struggle by a minority to appropriate the largest slice of land and its value, depriving the majority of their equal share.

The present system of property rights and the income distribution that follows from them result in the following:

- First, the hollowing out of culture. In a single social space, the maldistribution of the community's net income – rent – results in the cultural impoverishment of the dispossessed. The reciprocal of this is the cultural satiation of the rent appropriators who gorge themselves on other people's lifeblood.
- Second, the exploitation of humans by making profit out of suffering. People are treated as less than human in an age in which we talk glibly about the liberty of everyone.
- Third, our property rights disrespect nature. Our abuse and depletion of the environment follows from the failure to remain integrated – both spiritually and psychologically – with nature, and this separation originates with the privatisation of our common heritage in land.

The religious faiths ought to be eminently qualified to hold the ring over land disputes. The central motif of the Old Covenant is the economics and ethics of land. God's negotiation with Abraham was a land deal.

For me, the God of Abraham and of Moses was not the God of one tribe or nation. That God was of the totality of the universe, of all creation. The land deal offered to the Jews was a deal available to every community

willing to comply with the moral principles that make them stewards of the land.

Now, here is the strength of religion as the referee for the renegotiation of democracy and capitalism. The faiths have a vested interest in the outcome as it relates to Earth.

But this brings me to a fundamental problem for our religious leaders. They have a challenge to overcome, before they can preach to others. That problem is internal to their faiths and their institutions.

Many territorial conflicts are driven by *apparent* differences in religious affiliation. Ulster is one case. Kashmir is another. But if we re-read history in perspective, we discover that religion is used as a cover by people seeking to entrench their disproportionate claims to land at the expense of others.

*It is vital that the spiritual life is distanced from the political propaganda under which people of violence compete for territorial supremacy.*

This is where the spiritual life comes to the rescue of humanity. It offers the churches a unique opportunity to fulfil their missions. People of all beliefs since time immemorial have placed ultimate authority over Earth in their deities. The story of creation, and the primacy of ownership vested in other-worldly powers, is a universal narrative. The anthropological implications are profound. Without this attribution of creation to an authority beyond the direct experience of humans, it is doubtful that our species would have evolved the cultures that define our humanness. The spiritually sanctioned tenure of land enables people and communities to resolve the practical problems of sharing and using the resources of nature on the basis of principles that are determined by a non-human authority which has no favourites.

The Bible offers a rich tradition of spiritual guidance that ought to equip the leaders of the Christian, Jewish and Moslem faiths to unite in a common understanding of how to resolve land disputes. This entails ecumenical reflection and forgiveness. What would happen if the leaders of just these three faiths, who share a common origin, came together to affirm their spiritual history? To explore how their ideology could guide statesmen? Millions who live in despair could hope that Peace on Earth may not be a utopian dream.

I HAVE described one route – the spiritual route – to the first essential stage in the direction of globalised harmony. In effect, I am saying that we need to take the globe out of globalisation – literally. We need to remove land from contention. But how can that be done?

**The  
spiritual  
space**

We must be practical. When I say that we need to remove the globe

from globalisation, I do not mean that we should all seek refuge in monasteries. We are the creatures of Earth. We need to keep our feet firmly planted on the ground. The solution that we seek is prosaically visualised in ancient faiths and articulated in scientific terms by modern economists. We can now formulate strategies for sharing the earth in a way that accommodates the materialistic goals of capitalist economics with the spiritual fulfilment of the human soul. Economic science can deliver a solution to the challenge of sharing the earth in a way that harmonises with the teachings of the Bible.

Exploring the issues that would deliver this outcome needs to take place within a space where no-one feels threatened; where everyone feels nurtured and loved as equals. Where else except the spiritual space may we find this possibility?

**The holy example** BUT RELIGIOUS LEADERS must do more than provide a neutral space. They must lead by example. Consider, for example, the spatial problems posed by holy places. Religious leaders can agree on the sanctity of their holy places, and of how this relates to the physical space which they share. If they affirm the common physical space, while respecting the distinct characteristics of holy places, they would evolve a sacred model of land tenure that people could use to resolve secular conflicts in multi-ethnic communities. That model consists of the multi-layered use of a shared three-dimensional space. That model rests exclusively on the Sacred Rule: the globe is the common heritage of all sentient life.

We have now relocated land tenure into the centre of science and philosophy, but at a new level of meaning. For example, consider the implications for how this new definition of space facilitates the peaceful co-existence of multi-cultural communities. These occupy a single space. But each may wish to preserve an exclusive *cultural* space. They may do so within the context of this complex reformulation of space. Simultaneously, this space entails

- separation,
- overlap, and
- interaction.

This is complicated, but it must – and can – be achieved. It is achieved by nature, and it is not beyond the wit of mankind to rearrange our laws to emulate the laws of nature.<sup>2</sup>

If we do evolve a new concept of our living space on Earth, we would have no difficulty in resolving problems such as people's mistrust of free markets. Correctly framed within the terms of the Sacred Rule, free markets deliver an interactive economic system in which the marketplace fulfils its promise as the mediating mechanism of competing interests. But

this will not be accomplished for so long as we continue to privatise the public revenue – the sacred revenue of our communities – which is the rent of land and of nature's resources.

Besides the immediate problems of globalisation, there is another way of viewing the obligation to take the globe out of the Globalised Age. This age is likely to be a short-lived one, for we are even now laying the foundations for the Space Age. But to achieve progress – real progress – we need to master at least two spatially extreme cases on the way to the Space Age: I refer to the common heritage of resources beneath the seabed, and ownership of the sky. An imaginative proposal for establishing practical institutions to deal with the way we may conserve and share the sky has been suggested,<sup>3</sup> inspired by the way in which Alaska has solved the problem of sharing its primary natural resource – oil. And we are beginning to see a new literature emerging that specifies how resource rents constitute the core of a practical mechanism for distilling competing interests into a solution that harmonises everyone's needs.<sup>4</sup>

It is fashionable to seek solutions to the world's major problems on the basis of secular analysis, and this will continue to be the case if the spiritual leaders fail to intervene in a temporal manner that resonates with the material needs of the hundreds of millions of starving people – and the billions of people who are intuitively aware of their spiritual estrangement.

## References

- 1 George Miller. *Dead Loss*, London: Centre for Land Policy Studies, *forthcoming*.
- 2 For an elaboration of how the treatment of resource rents as public revenue delivers this space-sharing outcome, see Fred Foldvary, "Ethno-federalism: Geo-confederal democracy and Economic Justice", *Geophilos*, Autumn 2002 (01:2).
- 3 Peter Barnes, *Who Owns the Sky: Our common Assets and the Future of Capitalism*, Washington: Island Press, 2001.
- 4 See, e.g., David Bollier, *Silent Theft: The Private Plunder of our Common Wealth*, London: Routledge, 2001.