

# Poverty without hair shirts

FITZWILLIAM, founded in 1966, combines the outward elegance of the old-style Cambridge college architecture with all the interior amenities taken for granted these days by moderately well-off people committed above all to what they consider to be a high standard of living.

The food was good; and the service provided extended as far as daily bedmaking, daily cleaning of the study/bedrooms, and regular replenishing of the supply of materials for the early morning cup of tea.

Generally speaking, it would be hard to object to any of this; but, in the particular circumstances of a conference devoted to the Catholic Church's ideas on what should be done about European and world-wide poverty, as they are set out in seven papal "social" encyclicals, namely *Rerum Novarum* (1891), *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), *Mater et Magistra* (1961), *Populorum Progressio* (1966), *Laborem Exercens* (1971), *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987) and *Centesimus Annus* (1991), a little more of the

• *CONFERENCES of religious bodies are essentially comfortable affairs, DAVID REDFEARN found the one held in July at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge, subject 'Rerum Novarum', 1891-1991 - Four Revolutions: An Unfinished Agenda, was no exception.*

hair shirt would perhaps have given extra encouragement to serious consideration of a radical remedy.

Instead, there was a reliance on traditional appeals to altruism, and the recitation of abstractions that are comprehensible only to a select few.

THESE last were of fairly regular occurrence; and I was not the only one to find them a little puzzling. It is not easy, for example, to see how the problem of poverty, an essentially practical one that admits of a practical solution, can be solved in such terms as: "The positivist epistemology of transcendental ontology and precognitive phenomenology are cognitively-marginal to the temporality of determinate judgment and the ineffable ulterity of an incom-

measurable language gain."

It must be admitted, however, that one of the exponents of such philosophical gems also produced a criticism of one of Leo XIII's arguments in *Rerum Novarum* for retaining private ownership of land, namely that it enabled the passing on from fathers to sons of "all that is needful to enable them honorably to keep themselves from want and misery in the uncertainties of this mortal life."

The Pope, he pointed out, appeared to be unaware that, by the end of the 19th Century the household (*oikos*) was no longer the normal productive unit.

He himself was evidently unaware of Henry George's more serious objection concerning the type of land the Pope must have been thinking about: "...It is land that will yield an income to the owner as owner, and therefore that will permit the owner to appropriate the products of labor without doing labor, its profitability to the individual involving the robbery of other individuals."<sup>1</sup>

Contrary to the usual conception of the catholic Church as a monolithic structure ("When Father says turn, we all turn"), questionings of received doctrine and of official policies were fairly common, and aroused no automatic opposition.

It would seem, for example, that in the United States, to the disapproval of most of those present, the question of abortion - "a horrendous moral evil" it has been called - arouses more excitement among the higher-ranking clergy than does the question of war, the ultimate consequence of poverty, and, one would have thought, the

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scheme, on theoretical grounds; in fact, they acknowledge that a tax on the economic rent of land is the most efficient of all taxes.

But that Single Tax also accords with the general desire to view nature as a common heritage: in other words, it is an efficient fiscal policy with an ethical foundation. Implement it, argued Henry George, and watch poverty evaporate before your eyes, as idle hands are put

to work on land that was kept idle by proprietors for speculative purposes.

Whether we turn to the problem of ethnic conflict in South Africa (see page 86), or the need to create a new social system in the former republics of the USSR (see back page), we find that land is the central issue.

Socialism and capitalism underplay the importance of land, which is why both social systems are in a mess today. Georgism fits the missing pieces into the jigsaw puzzle.

most horrendous moral evil facing the world today.

I would have liked to point out that abortion is an issue that affects individuals only, and may therefore be condemned with impunity, but that powerful corporations have interests bound up with war. My waving arm, however failed to attract the attention of the chair.

AS A RULE, wherever the rich and powerful are involved, the church's "guidelines" offer a convenient method of steering between the Scylla of state authority and the Charybdis of popular unrest. Churchmen, it is laid down, should distinguish carefully between principle and policy, and avoid becoming involved in day-to-day events. This does not always happen.

One speaker reported an incident in the Philippines when a priest broke the secrecy of the confessional to warn the army of a peasant revolt in preparation. How could the peasants trust the church after that?

On the other hand, as I was able to tell the speaker and the audience, there was the story related by the Bishop of Shrewsbury<sup>2</sup> of the priest in the Philippines who ended up in prison after a deputation of peasants had stimulated him, by asking him how the Church proposed to carry out its policy of mediation by building a bridge, starting from the middle, between themselves, living on a bare subsistence, and the landlords, living luxuriously on the remainder of their produce.

Discontent with the church's attitude was expressed also, in the very strongest terms, by a speaker from Sri Lanka, who deplored its acceptance of native

peoples' deprivation of rights to the land in the country where they had been born.

But, on the whole, the conference participants seemed satisfied with its advice that those with the whip hand should exercise forbearance, and consider the interests of those less fortunate than themselves.

Such unrealistic optimism was no doubt made less accessible to reason by a continuing failure, dating, so far as the Catholic Church is concerned from *Rerum Novarum*, to distribute the term "property" between "land" and "wealth". The majority of those present, in failing to see this distinction, would not have been able to make even the first step towards an understanding of the origins of poverty.

There were, however, notable exceptions, such as an American academic who provided us with a detailed analysis of Henry George's criticisms of *Rerum Novarum*, an Anglican chaplain of another Cambridge college who revealed that he had long had an interest in George's proposition of the single tax on the value of land, and an elderly Italian Jesuit who said that what needed consideration above all was the inequality of rights to natural resources.

His gratitude to me after I reinforced his statement by quoting Henry George's analogy of a theatre where a minority had appropriated all the seats, made it seem likely that his opinion had not found much favour hitherto.

It is to be hoped that the next conference of this type will devote more time to the question of unequal rights to land; for this one, running in triplicate to ena-

ble 58 papers to be presented within three days, could hardly be expected to come to any practical conclusion.

When it is considered that the scope of the papers ranged from Thomistic social philosophy through theology and social science to economics and the contemporary world, this impression is strongly confirmed.

NEVERTHELESS, there was one moment of unexpected revelation. An English speaker had referred in passing to Leo XIII's having been helped in the writing of his encyclical by a group of "Counts and Barons". This was one of the times when I failed to get in a question; but, on a subsequent occasion I asked him whether I had heard him correctly. "Yes", he said, "in fact, they wrote it". "Does this not," I resumed, "help to explain the encyclical's advocacy of the private ownership of land?" He replied "It certainly does".

He then went on to explain that the whole question was tied up with the "Risorgimento," or unification of Italy in the 19th century. At the time of the writing of *Rerum Novarum*, all hope of regaining the Papal States, and of re-establishing the Pope as a temporal prince and rent receiver had not been abandoned. In fact, the last remnants of the Papal court were not dispersed until the 1980s.

When I asked my informant where if anywhere, all this was recorded, he replied that this was not the kind of history that historians write. He had learned it in Italy by word of mouth.

Did Henry George have any inkling of it when he wrote *The Condition of Labour*? Probably not; but it adds another dimension to our thought on the subject of papal pronouncements on questions concerning social justice.

#### REFERENCES

1. Henry George, *The Condition of Labour* (1891), page 46, in Henry George, *The Land Question, Etc.* New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1941. 2. Rt. Rev. John D. Davies, "God's laws, Land - And The Creation of Wealth" in *Land & Liberty*, March/April, 1991.