

Attitudes to the Ownership and Distribution of Land in Britain 1500-1930

**A Survey with Particular Reference to
Old Testament Paradigm and the Role of the Church**

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FOREWORD

Draft

Helen Hayward's research into land reform issues in Britain between 1500 and 1930 has been undertaken as part of the Jubilee Centre's broader research enquiry into the ethical questions raised by the ownership and distribution of property. These questions are important as property ownership can affect factors such as rootedness and belonging in communities as well as the distribution of wealth, and so significantly influence the organisation and conduct of human relationships.

Within the more specific context of the Jubilee Centre's special interest in the Biblical paradigm of social order, the ownership and distribution of land is also a central theme. There was the added interest of studying how the understanding of 'Hebrew Society' by British Christians since the Reformation has played a small part in shaping the attitudes of social reform movements in this country.

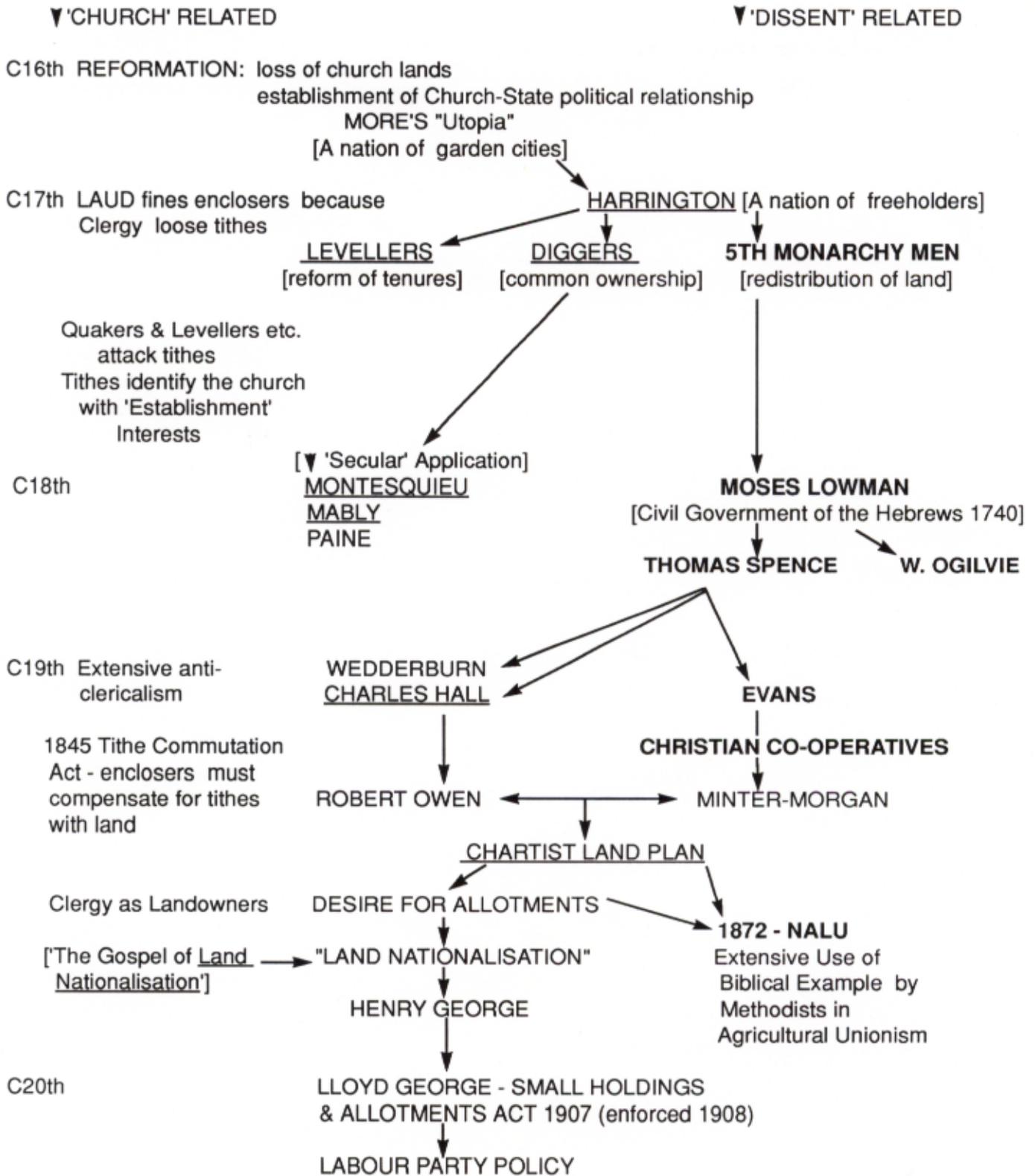
We hope this small study will be of interest to all those concerned with the role of property in the social order, and particularly to those with a concern to see the church play a greater role in building a society characterised by fair and committed social relationships.

April 1992

Michael Schluter
Cambridge

FIGURE 1

Thematic Progression of Land Reform Concerns
in British Social History 1500-1930



BOLD = Schemes with specific use of Old Testament paradigm.
UNDERLINED = Use/misuse of Biblical images/reference.

BACKGROUND

Introduction

This survey began its life as a study of the church's teaching on land ownership and distribution, in the context of the work of the Jubilee Centre in Cambridge on Jubilee Ethics; the application of Old Testament principles to contemporary society. This ideal firstly required some narrowing down, so that it is in fact largely a study in English history; and secondly some broadening out, because once land and property became an issue of any significance, the church owned such vast tracts of it that it was hardly likely to apply Old Testament principles of family landholding. Thus, particularly after the Reformation established the fundamental Church-State relationship, land reform was very much the preserve of 'heretics' and radicals. The theme of the Hebrew Republic was a common one in Eighteenth century radicalism, but those 'Christian Philanthropists' who advocated the implementation at least in part, of its principles of land ownership were isolated even from their 'radical' contemporaries. This theme continues into the Nineteenth century, as the land reform banner was taken up by certain groups of Methodists, and agricultural trades unions made use of Biblical ideas. There is an intricate tapestry of the use and misuse of Biblical ideas on all sides of the debate, which still continues.

The 'Early church'

Discussion of 'early church' values does not centre on issues of land. It is argued that early Christian communities were motivated by an imminent eschaton, and therefore rights to land and issues of inheritance were not considered to be of great importance. In addition, the Pauline mission was to cities, and particularly after the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, the church was 'western', Greek-speaking, and largely urban. Clearly some of the earliest Christians owned property, as indicated by churches meeting in individuals' houses, and from AD 222 Christians were officially allowed to own property. Significantly, by the late third century the church itself was property-owning. Contemporary debate seems to have centred on possessions, not OT values, and S. Jackson notes, "When Augustine composed his 'City of God' the right of Christians to own property and engage successfully in business was taken for granted by him."¹ Some key contemporaries wrote as follows:

Tertullian: "Among us everything is common property except our wives."²

Lucian (of the Palestinian Christians):" ...these Christians despise all things indiscriminately and consider them common property."³

Origen: "The law of Christ, as we follow it, does not permit us to have possessions on earth or houses in cities."⁴

"Jesus couldn't have given such crass rewards as houses and fields to his disciples."⁵

Thus the issue here seems to be an appeal to voluntary poverty, not theory of land or property.

¹ S Jackson Case, The Social Triumph of the Ancient Church, Books for Libraries Press, New York, 1933.

² R M Grant, Early Christianity and Society, Harper & Row, New York, 1977.

³ op. cit.

⁴ op. cit.

⁵ op. cit.

In the fourth century some of the fathers made attacks not so much on private property as its excessive accumulation in the hands of the rich. Several fourth century monks became bishops, including Ambrose of Milan, the hermit Basil, Bishop Athanasius, and John Chrysostom. Thus monastic ideals became a motive for attacks on private property. John Chrysostom, Bishop of Constantinople from 398, argued that private property was a result of the Fall. In an imaginary dialogue with a rich man he is asked whether Abraham's wealth was unjust, and the Bishop replies that OT peoples' wealth was by natural increase, not injustice - hinting at a rural ideal. His argument hinged on whether a rich man could trace the source of his wealth: could he be sure it was not unjust?" (God) provided the same earth to all. Since it was common property, how is it that you have so and so acres, while your neighbour has not a spoonful of earth?"⁶ When he is answered 'my father handed it to me', the rich man is condemned. There seems to be no sense of the foundational OT concept of inheritance in Chrysostom's arguments.

Apart from the above, denunciation of private property was by heretics - for instance "On Justice", attributed by Clement of Alexandria to Epiphane advocated community - of property and women.

The 'Medieval' era.

By the late Eleventh century the church held a quarter of the recorded land value in England. Thus the key point here is vast ecclesiastical land ownership in this period, and its incongruity with the vows of monastic orders to poverty. Hence debates centred on apostolic poverty, the degrees of perfection of various monastic orders, and the legitimacy of ecclesiastical wealth. Aquinas appealed to natural law, not scripture, to observe that there should be equality of possessions, and that it is legitimate for a poor man to expropriate some of a rich man's property.

R Hilton has noted some fundamental 'peasant' attitudes across Europe in the Medieval period.⁷ From the example of movements in France and Italy in the Eleventh and Twelfth centuries to establish rural communities, he notes a deep sense of hereditary family rights to holdings, and the retention of this sense even just as an aspiration, when land markets flourished after the Black Death. Increased 'peasant' assertiveness over rents, feudal service and villeinage was arguably endemic, but of significance to this survey is Hilton's point that this was particularly true in church lands. For example England's Benedictine abbeys and large church estates at St. Albans and Bury St. Edmunds saw conflict between the ecclesiastical owners of the land whose tendency was to preserve the servile status of villeins, and those who worked it. Thus the fight for land rights against the church is to be seen.

⁶ op. cit.

⁷ R Hilton, Bond Men Made Free, Temple Smith, London, 1973.

SIXTEENTH AND SEVENTEENTH CENTURIES

The 'Puritan Revolution'

The so-called 'Puritan Revolution' presents the first instance in England of a wealth of radical or simply new political thinking, frequently challenging the established state and church, and the relationship between the two. In this context the subject of land ownership was raised, but often less as an issue in its own right than as an adjunct to political demands. Here there begins a sense at least of associations between some agitation for land reform and Dissent.

The most significant contributor to the debate on land in this period was James Harrington. A friend of Charles I, he was known to favour 'republican' government, and in 1656 he published his treatise for a model government, *The Commonwealth of Oceana*⁸, dedicated to Cromwell. Fundamentally a political thinker, his central argument was that the balance of property determines the balance of power in the state - and hence equal property makes for equal power, and political stability is achieved by vesting property in many hands. He wrote, "...the fundamental laws of Oceana, or the centre of this Commonwealth, are the Agrarian and the ballot." The 'Agrarian' was a term later to become one commonly used to describe Harrington's ideal: a nation of freeholders. His idea simply entailed no one person holding land worth more than £2,000. Thus he wrote, "The whole territory of Oceana being divided by this proportion amounts to 5,000 lots. So the lands of Oceana being thus distributed, and bound to this distribution, can never fall to fewer than 5,000 proprietors." He also described primogeniture as a "flinty custom" and advocated the equal distribution of an inheritance among offspring. Drawing on the OT for example, he held that the year of Jubilee held the balance of the Jewish law together, just as his "Agrarian Law" was a balance, to prevent the concentration of property in too few hands in his utopia.

Harrington's influence and the idea of the Agrarian Law extended well into the Eighteenth century. There were, however, several contemporary groups who propounded radical ideas relevant to this survey during the upheavals of the 1640's and 1650's. Among them were the Diggers, the Levellers, and the Fifth Monarchy Men.

The Diggers

The Diggers were an untypical radical sect led by Gerard Winstanley which centred on the natural right to common ownership of land. Winstanley argued that the land was originally common, but its accumulation in the hands of a few had created a political and legal system to bolster the privilege of the few. On the establishment of 10 Digger communities of common land ownership set up in England between 1649 and 1650, Winstanley said, "Not only this common or heath should be taken in and manured by the people, but all the commons and waste ground in England and in the whole world."

Winstanley published several theological treatises, but could not be described as strictly 'Christian'. His appeal was more to natural law than to Biblical principles as the foundation of Digger thinking. In his *The Law of Freedom* he presented a scheme for an agrarian society in which there was to be no wage labour; all productive sources were to be

⁸ J Harrington, *Commonwealth of Oceana*, J Streater for Livewell Chapman, London, 1656.

commonly owned; commerce was outlawed; money was banned, and the internal sale or purchase of land or goods was a treasonable offence. There was in his plan no institutional church - no surprise given the Diggers' violent anti-clericalism.

The Levellers

The Levellers were a more substantial 'radical' sect concentrating on predominantly political and constitutional reform, and holding particular sway in the New Model Army in the 1640's. A fraction of Leveller writings, of which there were many in the heady times around and following the regicide, do, however, address certain agrarian issues. Overton's *Appeale from the Degenerate Representative Body...to...the free People of England* of July 1647 addressed in its penultimate paragraph the issue of common land: "That all grounds which anciently lay in common for the poore, and are now impropriate, enclosed, or fenced in, may forthwith (in whose hands soever they are) be cast out and laid open againe to the free and common use and benefit of the poore".

In the 'Large Petition' of 1647 and the 'Humble Petition' of September 1648, requests were made for an end to "...the tedious burden of tythes...". The 'New Engagement Manifesto' of 1648 made the Levellers' clearest attack on ancient feudal tenures, and advocated freeholding:

"...that the ancient and almost antiquated badge of slavery, viz. all base tenures by copies, oathes of fealty, homage, fines at the will of the lord, etc. (being the Conquerer's marks upon the people) may be taken away; and to that end that a certain valuable rate be set, at which all possessors of lands so holden may purchase themselves freeholders, and in case any shall not be willing or able, that there be a prefixed period of time after which all services, fines, customs, etc. shall be changed into and become a certain rent, that so persons disaffected to the freedom and welfare of the nation may not have the advantage upon the people to draw them into a war against themselves upon any occasion by virtue of an awe upon them in such dependent tenures."⁹

The Fifth Monarchists

The Fifth Monarchy Men were a millenarian movement predominant particularly in the Barebones Parliament of 1650, much in the mould of many European millenarian movements from 1100, for whom the first step towards the establishment of Christ's kingdom on earth was the destruction of 'godless landowners and clergy'. Their central tenet is illustrated by John Rogers' speech to the Barebones Parliament arguing that the 'Parliament of the Saints' shouldn't be reforming existing laws, but bringing in the laws of God given to Moses. The Fifth Monarchists' idea of the rule of the saints was to take the form of a social revolution, to be made permanent by the reform of landownership. The Fifth Monarchist Morgan Lloyd visualised great redistribution of land so that, in his words, "...no poor man shall have too little, nor the rich too much...". In John Rogers' *Sagrir. Or Doomes-day drawing nigh, with Thunder and Lightning to Lawyers* (7th Nov. 1653), and Medley's *A standard set up: whereunto the true seed and Saints of the Most High may be gathered together* (16th May, 1657), primogeniture was attacked, and like the Levellers and Quakers, the abolition of

⁹ H N Brailsford, *The Levellers and The English Revolution*, The Cresset Press, London, 1961.

copyholds and customary tenure, heriots, homage, and feudal fines was proposed. One Fifth Monarchist, Benjamin Stoneham, had a congregation in Suffolk which petitioned for the abolition of such "enclosing tenures".

The Fifth Monarchy Men demanded full implementation of the Mosaic judicial laws. (There had been an attempt to draft the constitution for the colony of Massachusetts on the basis of a synthesis between 'Mosaic' law and current legal practice in 1641, which was not adopted.) Rogers said to the Barebones Parliament, "Can Men make Lawes better than God?", and a Fifth Monarchist writer examined the cancellation of debts in this context. There was a precedent going back as far as Wyclif, and including the Anabaptists, of referring to Mosaic laws, but in reality preoccupation seems to have been more with those addressing moral offences than economic measures.

As late as 1657 a group of Fifth Monarchists under Venner planned a rising, and printed a manifesto embodying their ideas that the kingdom was Christ's; it would be ruled by a Sanhedrin chosen by the Saints; laws would be derived from the Bible, and all land tenures would be reformed.

All the above were regarded as violent revolutionaries, and have perhaps been credited with greater efforts at land reform than are justified, because of the fear with which they were regarded. At the Putney Debates of 1647 Henry Ireton, (Cromwell's son-in-law) expressed fear that the equality advocated by the Levellers would lead to the abolition of private property. Opponents in the 1640's accused the Levellers of spreading social radicalism and religious heresy, and identified them and other 'religious radicals' as 'Anabaptists' - an inaccurate use of a commonly used 'bogey-word' of the Seventeenth century. The extent to which such groups were feared as 'radical' is indicated by the 1647 'Joint Declaration of Independents and Baptists', in which 'communism' and 'social equality' were repudiated at length. The isolation of Winstanley and the Diggers even from other radicals is indicated by many Levellers' specific efforts to dissociate themselves from the Diggers.

Local historian of the Seventeenth century, David Underdown, describes many radicals of the 1640's as 'honest radicals' who, rather than sweeping social reconstruction, wanted 'godly reformation'. This often implied an equality of souls rather than society - just as described by Richard Sibbes in his *Heavenly Conference* (1656). Most Puritan writers interpret Leviticus 25 with a New Testament perspective. For instance for Matthew Henry, Jesus is our 'kinsman redeemer'. Only Richard Baxter identifies the problem of land in the hands of a few as an issue for Christians to address, and high rents that keep a tenant from his spiritual devotions. However close, then, radical ideas may have been in theory to Puritan 'reformation', the apparent threat to private property and the social order posed by the Levellers and others meant that even gentlemen army leaders were often fearful and 'conservative'. Cromwell, for instance described the Fifth Monarchists as having tongues like angels, but cloven feet; and accused them of carrying out the devil's policy and preaching communism.

Under Cromwell a standing committee for the poor was established in the Barebones Parliament to investigate depopulating enclosures, and as Lord Protector he promised a replacement for tithes. However, the extent to which radical demands for changes in landownership presented a threat to the 'godly landlords' is perhaps illustrated by the fact that

by the Act of Union in 1654, in Scotland, base (servile) tenures, fealty and homage were abolished, and the fine on change of tenancy limited to one year's rent - but no such change ever came any closer to home.

The Institutional Church

Where does the church fit into this heady morass of ideas in the upheavals of the Seventeenth century? It is, perhaps, vital to establish at this point that to identify 'the church' in the land debate (at whatever stage) is difficult to the point of absurdity. Undoubtedly there were convinced Christians among the Fifth Monarchists, amongst Cromwell's colleagues, and amongst Royalists. One example would be Francis Bampfield, a Royalist who opposed primogeniture on the basis that it ruined families and was unscriptural, referring to Deuteronomy 21:17. Despite political opposition, he thus clearly had much in common with the Fifth Monarchists so despised by many 'Puritans'.

However, at this point we will consider the established church in England. There are two central issues of relevance. The first is the association of the Church of England with the crown - in a sense the *ancien regime* - and thus with the social order. The former was reinforced by Charles I's close co-operation with Archbishop Laud who could be described as a chief minister of sorts during the 1630's. Thus J Walter¹⁰ takes James I's exclamation "No Bishop; No King" and uses it to express the feared threats to the social order posed by the radicalism of the 1640's in the wake of the regicide: "No King; No Bishop. No Bishop; No Gentleman."

The second is the issue of enclosure and tithes. Agrarian unrest focusing on enclosure was relatively commonplace in England from the mid Sixteenth century onwards (10,000 people are held to have died in the Norfolk Rising of 1549 over the issue). By the 1630's agitation was in some cases directly 'anti establishment', as a result of enclosing Bishops, and Charles I's enclosure of forests and fens during his 'personal rule'. Also, while Parliament did not meet in the 1630's enclosure riots were still dealt with, because their chief prosecutor was the Star Chamber, one of the series of ecclesiastical courts.

There are instances of Archbishop Laud fining enclosing landlords. This, however, seems to stem not from concern for common land, or individual rights, but rather from financial motives. **Tithes** were the means of support for clergy, and enclosure at this time usually involved the loss of tithes, or their commutation for a fixed amount not affected by subsequent price rises. These financial motives are illustrated by a commission set up by Laud in the midlands in 1633 to limit enclosure, which later became defunct as the church simply replaced its income there by selling licences to enclosing midlands landlords instead. Thus Christopher Hill argues that "Ecclesiastical opposition to enclosure was based on hard economic realities", and "...the struggle against tithes runs parallel to the struggle against enclosures."¹¹ Tithes were also a specifically agrarian tenet of protest because they were based on what the land produced, and were largely unpaid by merchants or town dwellers.

Thus opposition to tithes came into practically every radical programme, and abolition was advocated by the Levellers, Diggers, and Fifth Monarchists - and most of all by

¹⁰ J Walter, in J Morrill (ed.), The Impact of the English Revolution, Collins and Brown, London 1991.

¹¹ C Hill, Economic Problems of the Church of England, Clarendon, Oxford, 1956.

the Quakers. Herein lies the connection between early ideas for land reform and dissent: naturally it was in no dissenter's interest to prop up the established church through the payment of tithes. The Quakers were one of many new religious groups who first received the opportunity to come out into the open in the 1640's, with the breakdown of traditional church and state structures (others included Baptists, Presbyterians, and 'Independents'). In the Barebones Parliament, Quakers formed the vanguard of opposition to tithes. They also attacked copyhold tenures and feudal customs, but were the most forceful and most rural movement, concentrating on tithes. B Reay describes some Quaker activities against the established church as "guerrilla war"; for instance the practice of addressing waiting congregations on Sundays.¹² They attacked 'ungodly and greedy clergy' and 'parasitic priests'.

Thus the Quakers and the tithe issue illustrate how reform on land issues was fundamentally anti-clerical in nature; anti-clerical, and thus perceived as anti establishment. The Quakers were banned at the Restoration because of great fears that as a fundamentally rural movement, they would carry 'radical' ideas across the country. They were feared and hated to the point of being identified with Catholics and witches after the Restoration.

¹² B Reay, The Quakers and the English Revolution, Temple Smith, London 1985.

THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

During the Eighteenth century the political climate in Britain became much more favourable to new ideas than in the previous century. Particularly at election time, pamphlet wars raged and the bookselling trade flourished, especially in London. John Wilkes is the clearest example of demands for franchise and Parliamentary reform, although this is not to cloud the failure of attempts at any fundamental change.

Interest in 'Hebrew Society'

In this context a common feature of Eighteenth century dissent was the use of the Old Testament Hebrew society as an example of an agrarian republic. In 1740 a non-conformist divine named Moses Lowman published his very influential *Dissertation on the Civil Government of the Hebrews*, in which he described the Hebrew constitution as designed "to preserve the Property, Liberty, and Security of the people." He noted that: "There was a Provision of land for each Man in Property, upon one of the calculations, sufficient for a plentiful and decent Maintenance with Industry, good Husbandry and Frugality, which the constitution itself made fashionable and honourable, though by it none could have such Estates as to indulge themselves or to encourage others in Idleness or Luxury..."

He emphasised that territory was equally divided, and each man held his estate directly from God himself. Note his use of Harrington's terminology in his definition of "The Agrarian, or Law of Jubilee" as a means to perpetuate the division of lands and estates, and as he sums up his thesis: "By this Agrarian Law of the Hebrews, all estates were to be kept in the same families."

Thomas Spence

This strain of thought amongst non-conformists is demonstrated later in the Eighteenth century by Thomas Spence, a London bookseller originating from Newcastle, where, with the support of his Presbyterian minister James Murray he delivered a lecture to the Newcastle Philosophical Society in 1775.¹³ He based his argument about how land should be divided on the supposed 'natural law' that "...in the state of nature all men had land in common"; land which was theirs to work but not to sell. He emphasised that men held their land not just for themselves, but for posterity, and his plan was for parochial units within which land was held in common. This formed part of his plan for a whole new society in which all people would be brethren, and included standard Eighteenth century features such as parochial government and no standing army. For his lecture Spence was expelled from the Newcastle Philosophical Society, but it is interesting to note that his minister James Murray defended him, using the concept of the Jubilee in his defence, and asking of the Society, "Was the Jewish Jubilee a levelling scheme?", and "Would it be inconvenient to the Philosophical Society to read the twenty-fifth chapter of Leviticus?"¹⁴ In a similar vein was William Ogilvie.

¹³ T Spence, *The Real Rights of Man*, M Beer (ed.): *Pioneers of Land Reform*, G Bell & Sons, London, 1920.

¹⁴ M Chase, *'People's Farm': English Radical Agrarianism 1775-1840*. Clarendon, Oxford 1988.

As Spence's career developed, so did his use of Biblical imagery, derived no doubt from his strongly Presbyterian parents. Perhaps, too, his own Christian conviction is demonstrated by his efforts to translate the scriptures into his own phonetic language. The clearest of images in Spence's writing was the Levitical Jubilee, infused in his interpretation with the communal ownership of land. His use of Biblical imagery struck a millenarian or chiliastic note, and indeed with the advent of the French Revolution, he alienated himself from other radicals in advocating the destruction of the nobility "root and branch" if they contended redistributed landownership. It is interesting to note that in his journal "Pigs' Meat", which ran from 1793-5, by far the most quoted writer was James Harrington, arguably because both saw land as the key to political power.

Before returning to contemporaries of Spence, it is significant that Spence's followers met weekly from 1807, and, after his death in 1814 formed the Society of Spencean Philanthropists, dedicated to his ideas on the reform of landownership, and to the introduction of the plan by violence. Hence Spencean involvement in the Spa Fields Riot of 1816, and the Cato Street Conspiracy of 1821. Their significance lies in the person of Thomas Evans, Librarian to the Society, and previously secretary to the London Corresponding Society in the 1790's. From around 1819 he preferred the Spencean Philanthropists to be known as Christian Philanthropists, and he published a very 'Christianised' version of Spence's ideas in 1816 under the title *Christian Polity and the Salvation of the Empire*. He identified Moses' agrarian republic as a commonwealth, and with reference to God's land law for the Israelites he asked, "...if it be the revealed will of God, why is it not done?". He argued that "The territory of a nation is the People's Farm", and that God gave the earth to all equally, and did not include kings, rulers, subjects, or slaves. He wrote that the "... only powerful antidote..." to the problems of war and slavery were the "Laws of Moses".¹⁵

Evans looked back to a supposed era when, under Alfred the Great, England had had a written constitution and an agrarian commonwealth. With this in mind he wrote, "Without the restoration of the land, the gift of God to the people, reforms and revolutions are unavailing; they are mere struggles for power", and argued, "The end is come and a new era arrived; let it be hailed as a Jubilee, to cancel the great debt, to restore the land to the people and establish a written constitution defining the forms and powers of government, the rights of the people, the securities of their persons and properties; that is to say, establish Christianity and abolish paganism...". As Spence, he advocated parochial partnerships as the means to land redistribution and the establishment of "Christian brotherhood".

It is interesting to note that Evans leased a chapel in Worship Street, Shoreditch, and held regular meetings there for Spenceans. Eventually a split in the Spencean group occurred between Evans and the several dissenting preachers amongst them, and Robert Wedderburn, a Spencean with a distinctly secular theory of public ownership.

The People's Farm

The phrase 'A Nation is the People's Farm' became a slogan for radical reformers supporting the redistribution of land. It endured beyond Evans' use to be employed in the English Chartist Circular, and to describe the Chartist Land Plan. Likewise the Jubilee remained part

¹⁵ T Evans, *Christian Polity and the Salvation of the Empire*, London, 1816.

of the radical heritage, from Harrington to Lowman, Murray to Spence and beyond. The Spenceans published widely their 'Jubilee Hymn', sung to the tune of the National Anthem (here in two versions, with and without its millenarian overtones):

Hark, Hark the Trumpets sound,
Proclaim the Land around,
 The Jubilee!
Welcome the Day is come,
Blessed Millenium,
That gives to all their sum
 of property!

and

Hark, Hark the Trumpets sound,
Proclaim the Land around,
 The Jubilee!
Tells all the Poor oppress'd
No more shall they be cess'd
Nor Landlords more molest
 Their Property!¹⁶

From among the Spencean group Maurice Margarot published in 1812 his *Proposal for a Grand National Jubilee* in which he praised Mosaic Law, deplored "divorce from the land", and proposed the break-up of land into small lots. He went so far as to propose a trip to France to persuade Napoleon to invade England and restore the Saxon constitution with its agrarian basis.

Other 'Agrarian Laws'

Similarly, the idea of 'agrarian law' was a source of radical philosophy amongst contemporaries of Spence and Evans who adopted a more secularised view of the Old Testament paradigm. S T Coleridge, later identified as one of the early Christian Socialists, delivered a lecture in May 1795, "An Apology for the Mosaic Dispensation - A Demonstration of the essentially socialistic Character of the Laws of Moses". Echoing Harrington, he argued that "property is power, and equal property is equal power", and though he made use of Lowman's work, he emphasised the equalisation and common ownership of land rather than (Lowman) the equal division of land. Thus, "If we except Sparta, the Jewish has been the only Republic that can consistently boast of Liberty and Equality".

Charles Hall corresponded with Spence, and published his *Effects of Civilisation* in 1805 (reprinted 1813). He argued that the rich control all the poor man stands in need of, and denied (the opposite to the Biblical paradigm) that any man can have a natural, original and exclusive right to any portion of land. Citing Adam Smith, he adopted the argument that

¹⁶ M Chase, op. cit.

civil government was instituted for the defence of property, and thus for the defence of the rich against the poor. He advocated equal distribution of property, the abolition of primogeniture, and the collective ownership of land distributed to families in proportion to their numbers. He criticised Spence for thinking society could be transformed by the abolition of landownership without the abolition of other forms of wealth, for example by the levy of heavy duties on refined manufactures. Note this early mention of an agrarian society as a remedy for the ills of a newly industrialised society. As the Nineteenth century developed, land reform became in some cases inextricably linked with, on the one hand, agricultural labourers' protests against industrialisation, and on the other, utopian 'land hunger' ideals of urban industrial labourers.

In France both Montesquieu and Mably suggested the ideal of equal division of land. Montesquieu cited the examples of Sparta and Rome to argue that "The most perfect Republic is the most equal" (*L'Esprit de Lois*), and drafted a plan for equal landholdings in Corsica with a maximum limit for future landholdings (composed in the 1760's, but only published in 1861). Mably made a clear call in his *De La Legislation* for agrarian laws to redress inequalities of wealth and power. However, just how radical the 'Agrarian' was perceived to be, is illustrated by the imposition of the death penalty in 1793 by the French National Convention for anyone who proposed an 'agrarian law', defined as the forcible redivision of property, especially land. This attitude to the 'agrarian' principle in France after the Revolution is an aid to understanding how unspeakably radical the redistribution of property, and especially land was to contemporaries of Spence etc., and why the Spenceans, although influential, constituted only a fraction of the radical population in London.

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

In the course of the Nineteenth century the land issue gradually became a part of the mainline political agenda, and for the first time prompted several Acts of Parliament, and 'central' interest. As previously, however, its relationship to the church and Christian influence is patchy, particularly as the land reform issue became a more acceptable bandwagon on which to jump.

Chartist and other Land Plans

In terms of the ideas of Spence, Evans and Hall, one of the clearest progressions was the Chartist Land Plan, in which Fergus O'Connor bought three estates and sold shares at 26s each (paid in weekly instalments). 7,000 people, largely from industrial areas, applied for shares - holders of two or more shares were entitled to ballot for a house, two acres of land and an advance of £15 capital. On payment of 5% of the original outlay shareholders could become owners. The Chartist plan was referred to as a People's Farm, and the Chartist song affirmed equal rights to the soil, and looked forward to eventual equality at the Jubilee. The plan was, however, only a small part of the Chartists' political and constitutional agenda for reform; perhaps similarly to the Levellers of the Seventeenth century. It is interesting to note that several Chartist leaders were Methodists, for instance William Lovett and other regional leaders. The Chartists used the Primitive Methodist technique of camp meetings, and interestingly, Bradford was a centre of Chartist and Methodist activity. The Land Plan was eventually declared illegal under the Lotteries Act, but some contemporary experiments seem to have had more success.

In the 1840's the Christian Co-operative Joint Stock Company founded two communities in Wales, with the aim of locating members on the land. One of these lasted 10 years, and foreshadowed the development of building societies. Similarly, 'Religious Socialists' founded a similar co-operative aiming to buy up land and people it. Land schemes were also frequently discussed in trades societies; for instance Coventry ribbon weavers established a 'Labourers' and Artisans Co-operative Society' to cultivate land. The industrialist/philanthropist Robert Owen advocated villages of co-operation with a distinctly millenarian outlook, while dismissing all forms of religion. John Minter-Morgan, however, modified Owen's scheme to include a church and minister in his 'self-supporting villages', under the auspices of the Church of England.

Allotments

One of the key elements in the change in political attitude to land in the Nineteenth Century was the issue of allotments. In 1796 Wilberforce and the Bishop of Durham founded their 'Society for bettering the condition of the poor.' In 1800 the Board of Agriculture offered two gold medals; firstly for the person to build on his estate the most cottages for labourers each with a proper proportion of land and a garden; and secondly for the best scheme to render allotments general throughout the kingdom. Thereafter, successive enclosure acts provided for allotments (often, significantly, free from tithes), and experimented with 'parish farms' - acreage overseen by churchwardens, to make into allotments in each parish. The latter was largely unsuccessful, due to suspicion of parish oversight of the allotments, and the

idea of 'charity land'. However, in the 1840's the Anti Corn Law League established smallholdings and allotments to win smallholders' votes for the campaign for the repeal of the corn laws. When the National Agricultural Labourers' Union was founded in 1872 it was committed to the increase of allotments and 'peasant proprietorship'. By 1886 there were 394,517 allotments of under four acres in Britain, and 272,567 garden allotments. Railway companies granted allotments and gardens to workers, to the sum of 39,425 detached from cottages, and 6,142 attached to cottages in this period.

From the 1887 Local Government Act, parish, and later county councils were empowered to hire land for allotments - if necessary, compulsorily. Thus the 1898 Parliamentary return showed that between December 1894 and June 1897, the land acquired by local authorities totalled 14,818 acres, let to 32,663 tenants. Later, the 1908 Smallholdings and Allotments Act allowed compulsory acquisition of land allotments, and in line with political arguments towards land nationalisation, encouraged tenancy rather than ownership. Hence the Act provided smallholdings for 18,486 applicants by December 1914.

Agricultural Labour Movements and Tithes

Nineteenth century agricultural labour movements are significant here because of their demands; their predominant anti-clericalism; and the contribution of Methodism to the use of Biblical ideas to furnish arguments about the land.

Following the Swing riots of 1830, in which farm machinery was attacked and clergy were threatened, labourers' petitions from Buckinghamshire (1834) and Essex (1837) argued for their right to a "rood of land", or "small allotment of land to be cultivated with a spade". Directly linked with such demands was deep anti-clerical feeling; for instance there were threats to vicars during the 1830 riots in Essex and the Isle of Wight. E P Thompson writes: "It was for the tithe-consuming clergy that the especial hatred of the rural community was reserved".¹⁷

At this point it is worth exploring the tithe issue again in its Nineteenth century context. Frequently, in times of agricultural distress or 'depression' - for instance after 1814, when agricultural prices broke at the end of the Napoleonic wars - protest was related to tithes, because of their regressive nature. Agitation against tithes in this period led to the appointment of a Select Committee on tithes. By 1822 radical pamphleteers published such tracts as "Remarks on the consumption of public wealth by the Clergy",¹⁸ and pressed for a capital levy beginning with church property. As late as 1886, during agricultural depression, demands were refused in Denbighshire, Wales, for a reduction in tithe just as rent was reduced in difficult times. This led to the formation of an Anti-Tithe League, under which banner protest was carried out against tithes and the distribution of land (such that a Clergy Defence Association was formed in October 1886).

From the Swing riots, the predominate demand was for allotments or small plots of land - which could only be obtained at the expense of Parson and Squire. L M Springall points out that by this time clergy were gentry by birth and education. In addition, where

¹⁷ E P Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Victor Gollancz, London, 1963.

¹⁸ W R Ward, 'The Tithe Question in the Early Nineteenth Century', in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 16 (1965).

enclosure was expensive, enclosers wanting to avoid the tithe tended to negotiate a commutation of the tithe for land for the appropriate clergyman. This was confirmed by law in the Tithe Commutation Act of 1845, and thereafter there is increased evidence of absentee clergy, and of new buildings, as clergy sought to line in a manner in accord with their new status: for instance in Scotland livings doubled or trebled in value overnight. W R Ward argues, "Commutation of tithe reduced friction between the church and farmers, but helped alienate them from the labourers".¹⁹

There is then, a fundamentally significant relationship between agricultural/land protest and tithes. Its significance lies in the fact that it seems that in those areas where the pressure to enclose was greatest, for instance in Norfolk, Lincolnshire and the East Riding, dissent was most likely to flourish. Thus Lincolnshire became a strong Methodist area, and Norfolk and the East Riding significantly Primitive Methodist strongholds. By contrast, in Lancashire, where there was little commutation of the tithe for land, the established church seems to have flourished as much as dissent, and much better than in Yorkshire. In areas of older enclosure, tithe-paying continued as before, and hence the late Nineteenth century disturbances noted above in Wales. Thus the relationship between when agricultural depression struck, and when enclosure was carried out, underlay the spread of dissent, providing the conditions for the relationship between Primitive Methodism and the land issue in the latter part of the century.

Agricultural Unionism

Before turning to agricultural unionism in England, there is value in examining briefly an earlier movement: that of Scottish farm servants in the 1860's, where the Highland Law Reform Association was supported by some Free Church ministers. A contemporary's reminiscences published in the Berwickshire News in 1923 sketches the context of late Nineteenth century agricultural labour movements. He recalls a public meeting where labourers provided the chief speakers on the issue of servants' bondage: "The bulk of their imagery and appeal was almost entirely from Holy Writ; no reference whatever being made to writers on economics, probably for the very good reason that they knew nothing of them. They knew, however, the economics taught in Deuteronomy, which, after all, was a very good text book with its restrictions and prohibitions against harsh or unjust treatment.... Proceeding step by step in denunciation of the bondage system he would, at the end of each in solemn tones ask, "And what does the Lord our God say to that?" This he would answer in apt biblical quotation. The effect was electric..."²⁰ Thus when Joseph Macleod wrote his *Highland Heroes of the Land Reform Movement* after the events, he entitled his first chapter 'Land Reform Justified: The Bible and the Land Question.'²¹

In English agricultural unionism, similar use of biblical argument on the subject of land reform resulted from the close relationship between local agricultural trades unions and the National Agricultural Labourers Union (hereafter NALU), and members of the Primitive Methodist Connexion. The latter was one of several branches of the original Methodist church (others included the Methodist New Connexion, the Bible Christians, the Protestant Methodists etc.), and was founded originally as a revivalist movement. The Bible was the

¹⁹ op. cit.

²⁰ J P D Dunbabin, Rural Discontent in the Nineteenth Century, Faber, London, 1974.

²¹ op. cit.

main source of inspiration for protect; union organisation closely resembled the 'democratic' structure of Methodist churches; Methodist buildings were often used for union meetings; and researches demonstrated that many, if not the majority (Nigel Scotland²²) of union leaders were Primitive Methodists. At the inaugural meeting of the NALU, members were addressed as 'Brethren', and demands were accompanied by frequent shouts of 'Hallelujah'. George Edwards, a central NALU leader wrote in his autobiography, "...every time I attend a labour meeting, I attend a religious service."

Two prominent Union leaders were Joseph Arch (founder), and Edwards. Both were non-conformist Norfolk men and MP's. Edwards particularly made his Christian beliefs clear in his autobiography, wherein he attributed all his achievements to his faith, and described himself as 'saved'. When he entered Parliament in 1920 he was invited to join the Industrial Christian Fellowship, which aimed to promote faith in industry. Edwards' famous comment, "One cannot divorce labour from religion"²³ introduces a theological viewpoint which so integrated issues of land and the Bible as to render them inseparable.

The Primitive Methodist Movement as a whole held a specific millennial view, understanding it to refer to physical and material conditions of living. Thus the *Labourers Union Chronicle* (the newspaper of the NALU) printed the following by Howard Evans on 19th July 1873, "...we believe that godliness has as much to do with life that now is, as with that which is to come....we hold that the bodies of men need saving as well as their souls, and you can hardly do the latter without doing the former; that unless men have decent homes and proper food, it is hopeless to expect them to lead virtuous lives."²⁴ By 1872 there were 11,183 Primitive Methodist members in Norfolk and Suffolk, and 7,871 in Lincolnshire. By the spring of 1872 village unions were active in Norfolk villages, in the context of agricultural depression, the leaders of which were nearly all local preachers in Primitive Methodist chapels. The NALU constituted the amalgamation of such branches into districts later in the same year under Arch, with a consultative body of gentlemen. (Incidentally this council, the Arch's previous connections with the Liberal Party drew the NALU away from other unions, permitted by the Friendly Societies Act of 1871, and towards the Liberals).

Thus the first issue of the *Labourers' Union Chronicle* on 7th July 1873 centred on land. It advocated the division of waste land and all state-owned forest land into smallholdings to be rented at 4% per annum in perpetuity, and the confiscation of every gift of legacy of more than 100 acres. In 1874 the *Union Chronicle* printed a full length front page article entitled, "THE COMMONS OF ENGLAND BELONGED TO THE PEASANTRY AND WERE STOLEN BY THE LANDLORDS". Nigel Scotland argues that the goal of Arch and Chapman (a Primitive Methodist local preacher from Alford), "...was clearly in advance of their Marxian contemporaries. They looked for a society in which every man would possess his own land, in short, the brotherhood of man."²⁵ To this end the land monopoly was challenged from the outset by reference to Psalm 24: "The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof." In this context the most frequent demand was once again for allotments and smallholdings. Indeed Arch said, "...a lot of men were craving for the land..." and, "...they were land-mad."²⁶

22 N Scotland, Methodism and the Revolt of the Field, Sutton, Gloucester, 1981.

23 op. cit.

24 op. cit.

25 op. cit.

26 J P D Dunbabin, Rural Discontent.

On the 1st January 1876 the leading article in the *Labourer* outlined, "...in the demand we make for the peasantry of England and the sister nations for a fairer share on the profits of the soil, we are not venturing any wild speculative notions, but only asking...what the Bible, Moses and God have testified."²⁷ As late as 1984 Norfolk branch official Arthur Munford wrote to the *English Labourers' Chronicle* under the 'Land for the People', "The future cry must be 'Land for the People'. The only system of land tenure which has the sanction of God was the Mosaic, wherein arrangements were made that the poor should never be driven from the soil. The scriptural ideal is that every man should sit under his own fig tree, none daring to make him afraid."²⁸ The image of each man under his fig tree, and Jesse Collings' dictum "three acres and a cow" were commonly used in such writing.

The *English Labourers' Chronicle* also reprinted a passage from a book entitled *The Laws of God versus the Laws of Man*. The passage, in the form of a catechism, attacks landlords who deprive labourers of their age-old rights to the soil, and uses Old Testament language:

The Short Catechism

Question	Who created the land?
Answer	God
Question	Who then has the sole right to order its disposal?
Answer	God
Question	And what has he revealed in his will respecting it?
Answer	That it should be divided among all the people, to every man his portion. See Numbers, 26 chap, verses 51 to 56, also Ezekiel, 47 chap, verses 21 to 23.

....Does this not prove that God designed the land to be common property and possession of the people?²⁹

The Times reported of the NALU National Conference in June 1874, "Some seventy were here, sent from all parts of England. With a few exceptions all have been agricultural labourers, and a large proportion were once local preachers among the Primitive Methodists."³⁰ In this context it is hardly surprising that direct quotation from biblical passages was the most frequent basis for union arguments at conferences and in newspapers - 60% of which were direct reference from the Old Testament (Scotland). That this was the foundation of union arguments rather than socialist or 'Christian Socialist' writings is illustrated firstly by the background of many such union leaders, for instance it is said that George Edwards couldn't read at all; and also by the fact that although Primitive Methodist demands bear traces of Christian Socialist thought, use was not made of their critical methodology. In the *Primitive Methodist Quarterly* in 1881 an article admitted Kingsley's merits, but rejected his unorthodox theology. Its writer argued that Maurice and Kingsley's theory of the atonement was not atonement, "...it is a scheme of moral influence only."³¹

²⁷ N Scotland, Methodism.

²⁸ op. cit.

²⁹ op. cit.

³⁰ op. cit.

³¹ op. cit.

Thus the Primitive Methodists asserted a self-confessed 'simple' evangelical faith, taking arguments from the Bible.

The inherent connections between agricultural trades unionism and the Primitive Methodist Movements can be seen in Primitive Methodist and other Methodist publications. In 1873 the *Primitive Methodist Magazine* attacked the English land system by which so much was held in the hands of so few. It argued that 100 years earlier England had had 250,000 landowners, whereas now it had only 30,000. It noted, "We do not advocate the French system of compulsory land division..."³² but makes the point (echoing Harrington, for instance) against the (Biblical) idea of inheritance, "...we have a decided objection to the tying up of land in the family." This is presumably an objection to the entail within families of very large landed estates. In the same year the *United Methodist Free Church Magazine* argued that large farmers should allow married labourers half an acre of land. As late as 1906 the *New Connection Magazine* continued the same theme: "The supreme title of the land is vested by the Creator in the people."

Anti-Clericalism

This movement relating the land and the Bible had, interestingly but not surprisingly, definite anti-clerical overtones. L M Springall³³ notes the following in the development of village labourers' unions: at first clergy and ministers alike sympathised with labourers' difficulties and attended meetings. However, Anglican clergy found that their congregations consisted of both labourers and farmers, and many found they could not continue to attend labourers' meetings. As a result, Anglican clergy became the subject of attacks because of their association with farmers' interests, and non-conformists were perceived, on the other hand, as firm unionist. Thus the issues preoccupying village unions were reform of land tenure, the extension of the franchise, and the dis-establishment of the church - all together. *The Labourers' Union Chronicle* had as its masthead, "Freedom from Priestcraft." The letters of a Bedfordshire parson dated 1885 illustrate the rationale behind this combination. He notes the feeling of local labourers that, "If the church is disestablished we labourers'll have all the tithe divided among us...", and "I've voted Tory before, but I don't see how I can help voting Liberal now, for they're bound to give us some land, after all they've promised."³⁴ This latter comment illustrates yet another, but related issue in this rather complex set of interrelationships. During the 1880's the debate over the franchise first made the vote for labourers imminent, and from 1885 a reality. This induced increased division in local society as party allegiance made for definite divisions. For instance Arch was nominated Liberal candidate for Norfolk in 1885, and was returned with a 600 majority. Union leaders were also welcomed at Liberal Party meetings. Thus local society was perceived as unionists/labourers/non-conformists (Liberal); and squire/parson/publican/gamekeeper (Conservative). As a result of such alliances, dis-establishment became a unionist/non-conformists tenet. The role of the parson contributed to this because the parish vestry was the centre of a village's administration and affairs, and the vicar controlled public charities, administered the Poor Law, had a hand in the distribution of land for allotments, and influence in the village school. L M Springall thus argues, "He personified the impediments

³² op. cit.

³³ L M Springall, *Labouring Life in Norfolk Villages 1834-1914*, G Allen and Unwin, London, 1936.

³⁴ J P D Dunbabin, 'The Revolt of the Field - Agricultural Labourers' Movements in the 1870's', in *Past and Present* (1963)

to reform." An article in the *Primitive Methodist Review* in 1892 argued, "...The State Church in the persons of the Parson and the Squire has organised a system of charity which is calculated to pauperise the people and destroy all sense of independence. Is the State Church not largely responsible for the present condition of the agricultural labourer? Has not the Church joined in a conspiracy with the landed classes to keep the labourer in subjection?"³⁵ Thus dis-establishment and disendowment went hand in hand.

Land Nationalisation

In addition to the NALU, several other organisations sprang up around the same time, including the Free Land League, of which Arch became the Vice President in 1885, and whose first aim was the abolition of primogeniture. Similarly, the Land Restoration League came about in 1884 largely as a result of the arguments of Henry George, the main thrust of which was a single, universal land tax as the means of government revenue. In 1891 and 1892 the Land Restoration League's 'Rev Van' toured Norfolk, and in 1896 George Edwards undertook a tour of lectures in the Red Van in Wiltshire, carrying the slogan "The Gospel of Land Nationalisation", despite Arch's argument to the TUC that land nationalisation would not alleviate the problems of contemporary labourers. The Eastern Counties Labour Federation first launched their Red Van tours (in conjunction with the League) because of, "the labourers' feeling that the land question was at the bottom of the Labour question."³⁶ The federation advocated the purchase of land by the state at a nominal price, to be let to farmers at 50% below the present rate. This attitude towards the nationalisation of land, typified by J S Mill's comment in the Irish land debate, "...the land of Ireland, the land of every country, belongs to the people of that country,"³⁷ fed what became widely held views on the state ownership of land, and thus land became an issue in the Liberal/Labour struggle for survival, and remained Labour Party policy as late as 1937.

³⁵ R E Wearmouth, Methodism and the Struggle of the Working Classes 1850-1900, Edgar Backus, Leicester, 1954.

³⁶ J P D Dunbabin, Rural Discontent.

³⁷ J S Mill, The Irish Land Question, Longmans, London, 1870.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

John Hart,³⁸ an American Catholic writer, has noted the development in Catholic thought regarding land ownership. Since Pope Leo XIII's "Rerum Novarum" of 1891, questioning property relationships in which people could use but not own land, successive Catholic statements have echoed such sentiments. Pope John XXIII, in his encyclical "Mater et Magistra" of 1961 wrote, "We must...consider as an ideal the kind of farm managed by the family." Pope Paul VI, in his encyclical "Populorum Progressio" of 1967 argued that the state has a right to expropriate land used in any way detrimental to others. His "Bull of Indiction of the Holy Year 1975" raised the concept of the Jubilee Year and described it as, "a new ordering of all things that were recognised as belonging to God." Pope John Paul II, at Des Moines, Iowa, in 1979, reiterated the arguments about expropriation, and added, "The land is God's gift and man's responsibility", noting that it is intended to be fruitful for "generation upon generation".

In the "Gaudium in Spes", paragraphs 66-71, of Vatican II, the right of all to sufficient share of earthly goods for oneself and one's family is repeated, and Hart emphasises its angle on the needs of, "the people of today and of the future". More specifically, in the United States in 1923 the National Catholic Rural Life Group published its 'manifesto for rural life', arguing that God created the earth for mankind in general, and the earth as the heritage of all mankind, within which property-owning was stewardship. The thrust of its statement was that, "It follows that an economic system, to be equitable, must provide opportunity for the masses to become owners. This idea was developed by Bishop George Spez and others as the concept of the 'Family Farm'. As recent as 1979 the Catholic Committee on Social Development and World Peace advocated the Family Farm as the means of widespread ownership and stewardship of the land. In 1980 mid-western bishops (from all 67 regions) signed a paper entitled "Strangers and Guests", advocating the principle of the Family Farm, and drawing its title from Leviticus 25.

Such thinking is disappointingly summed up by Hart with more than a hint of a 'New Age' type philosophy rather than an Old Testament one. He concludes, "The future of the earth is at stake...the earth and our children await our decision." Clearly the impact of Old Testament principles is acknowledged in the writing of several Twentieth century Catholic leaders, but as ever, the conclusions drawn by readers are not always close to the Old Testament paradigm. As seen above, for centuries Old Testament principles have been used as a basis for arguments about land; to furnish or illustrate existing strategies; and sometimes as an acceptable or motivating tag to attach to propositions largely unrelated to the organisation of land ownership laid down for the Israelite nation when God promised His people their own land.

³⁸ J Hart, Spirit of the Earth (and subsequent quotations) Paulist Press, New York, 1984

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