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Tension and Taxation: Henry George and the Catholic Church

Peter Quinton Whitfield

Southern Methodist University, pwhitfield1@cougarmail.collin.edu

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Cover Page Footnote

Thanks to Dr. Kyle Wilkison for indispensable research advice, guidance, and encouragement.

Individual Research Project

Research in progress for HIST 1302: United States History II

Faculty Mentor: Kyle Wilkison, Ph.D.

This paper well represents the individually-selected research topics produced by a decade's worth of Honors History 1302 students. The two-semester-long project typically begins with an annotated bibliography in History 1301, followed by a complete paper in History 1302. Each student chooses her or his own topic bounded only by the chronological scope of the course with a demonstrable connection to the people of the United States. The assignment urges students to select topics—no matter how broad or narrow—to which they feel a strong connection. Once a special area of interest is established, we work together to discover a research question to explore.

Peter Whitfield's paper demonstrates a particularly well-developed set of skills the course sought to strengthen. The author bases this story of an unlikely alliance between Gilded Age radical social reformer Henry George and New York City Catholic priest Father George McGlynn on thorough readings in a number of monographs, scholarly research articles, and primary sources. The reader finds herein clear narration and critical, incisive analysis that bodes well for this young scholar's planned future graduate study of philosophy.

Peter Whitfield

Kyle Wilkison

HIST 1302

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Tension and Taxation: Henry George and the Catholic Church

The American Gilded Age reformer Henry George is today most well known for his advocacy of a policy known as the Single Tax. Less well known is the strained relationship that his ideas had with the Catholic Church. Although much of his political support, first as a reformer and later as a candidate for mayor of New York City, came from working class Catholics and even some clergy, the church hierarchy was itself almost uniformly against him. A good portion of this tension was a consequence of philosophical-theological disagreements between George and mainstream Catholic teaching when it came to the moral legitimacy of private land ownership. The Catholic world's ambivalence towards George can be explained by internal conflicts, principally involving a radical priest named Edward McGlynn who befriended George and adopted the Single Tax position.

Father Edward McGlynn was an Irish priest who became Henry George's most fervent supporter among the clergy after reading his 1879 magnum opus, *Progress and Poverty* (O'Donnell 106-7), in which George argued for the policy that would eventually come to be known as the Single Tax (O'Donnell, inside cover). In a nutshell, the Single Tax meant the abolition of all taxes except those on property, which would then be raised to equal the rental value of the land. George's advocacy for the Single Tax was based on a combination of his philosophical opposition to private land ownership and

his conviction that such a tax policy would lead to the elimination of poverty and the amelioration of practically every societal ill. His rejection of the private ownership of natural resources went against dominant Catholic thought and would be the source of most of the ecclesial opposition to him and McGlynn (Benestad 1; George, *Progress and Poverty* 405-7, 545).

Father McGlynn was the pastor of St. Stephen's, a church in an impoverished section of New York City. Boasting 25,000 parishioners, St. Stephen's was the largest parish in the city. McGlynn often served the poor in his community and earned a reputation as a radical for his aggressive pro-labor agitation (O'Donnell 106; Thomas 31). He was charismatic, employing powerful rhetoric in his speeches and writings in favor of policies like the Single Tax and against the mistreatment of workers. He gave these speeches while wearing his clerical collar, often leading to the perception that his opinions represented Catholic teaching. The combination of McGlynn's aggressive political activity and his powerful influence among the working class foreshadowed other so-called "labor priests" in American culture and media of the type immortalized by the reality-inspired-character Father Barry, played by Karl Malden in *On the Waterfront*. McGlynn's political activism and charisma also foreshadowed the controversial anti-Semitic radio priest of the 1930s, Father Charles Coughlin. Although unlike Coughlin, McGlynn was no anti-Semite—he once provided the necessary funds for the construction of a synagogue ("Late Actor"; Malone 12; O'Donnell 124-6; "People & Events").

Furthering his role as a labor priest and stepping further outside the bounds of normal clerical behavior in the American church, McGlynn worked closely and openly

with Henry George in the New York City labor movement and its political arm, The United Labor Party. The two also bonded over a shared opposition to landlordism in Ireland. Such direct participation in partisan politics represents something of an aberration in American Catholicism, rare even before Pope John Paul II restricted priests from holding political office in 1980 (“History of Clergy in Congress”). Nevertheless, McGlynn had no problem with public political activity. When George ran for mayor of New York City in 1886, McGlynn supported him wholeheartedly, going so far as to campaign for him and violate canon law (Carey 208). The race would lead to a heightening of tensions between George and the church, as well as between McGlynn and his bishop (O’Donnell 124, 217; Thomas 31).

The 1886 New York City mayoral election was a three-way race between Henry George (under the United Labor Party banner), a Tammany-Hall-backed Democrat named Abram Hewitt, and a Republican named Theodore Roosevelt (yes, the future president). George’s election strategy was to construct a ragtag coalition consisting of German socialists, Irish Catholics, a variety of labor unions, and sections of the middle class. Both of his opponents, particularly Hewitt, portrayed George as a radical whose election would lead to violence in the manner of the French Revolution. Meanwhile, Tammany Hall worked to keep Irish Catholics—a demographic that traditionally supported their candidates—from switching their support to George (O’Donnell 208, 212-13, 220-1, 232, 235, 238; Summers 196).

Paradoxically, the climate surrounding the mayoral election of 1886 would raise both Catholic support and opposition to George to new levels. He was very popular with Irish Catholics, and many of them supported his candidacy. Given that George was an

Evangelical Protestant who frequently employed religious rhetoric in his speeches, his popularity among Irish Catholics is a bit surprising. However, certain factors did favorably dispose New York's Irish immigrant population towards him. He was free of the anti-Catholic prejudice that so often characterized American Protestant political reformers. He also possessed the unequivocal endorsement of the influential Father McGlynn, a record of advocating for Irish land rights, and an Irish Catholic wife whose sister was a nun. Put simply, George's credibility with the working-class Irishmen of New York City could not have been better. To capitalize on this advantage, he campaigned aggressively for their votes and even gave campaign speeches inside Catholic churches (O'Donnell 106-7, 227).

Unfortunately for George, he did not have the support of the entirety of the church. The American Episcopate was uncomfortable with his ideas to say the least. Conservative Archbishop Michael Corrigan of New York was especially alarmed by any hints of radicalism, and he found George and McGlynn's close association worrisome. In principle, Corrigan was opposed to political activity on the part of his priests, and McGlynn's tendency to refer to George as a prophet certainly did not make the case any more acceptable. All this added to the fact that political campaigning by a cleric violated canon law (Carey 196). When he heard of plans for Father McGlynn to give a prominent speech in support of George's candidacy, Corrigan forbade the priest from making any such speech. McGlynn's initial refusal to obey led to a two-week suspension of his priestly faculties and a permanent prohibition from any public speeches in support of George and his run for mayor—although he continued to appear beside him in public (O'Donnell 150, 208, 216-18, 233).

Years later, it was suggested that Tammany Hall had influenced Corrigan to silence McGlynn and thereby stop George's candidacy. Tammany Hall often made alliances with the church in New York, and given the archbishop's deep suspicion of McGlynn's ideas, it would hardly have taken much persuasion to convince the archbishop to act against him (O'Donnell 218). It is safe to say that Corrigan would have disciplined McGlynn with or without external pressure given that the priest was in public and flagrant violation of canon law.

Even if the extent of Tammany Hall's involvement in the silencing of McGlynn is doubtful, their involvement in a last-minute effort to dissuade Catholics from voting for George is indisputable. Two days before the election, agents of Tammany Hall acquired and distributed a letter from the Vice-General of the Diocese of New York condemning George's principles as "contrary to the teachings of the church." George spent election day with a collared McGlynn at his side, but the damage was already done. He received 31% of the vote, enough to finish in second place ahead of Teddy Roosevelt but far behind Hewitt. The timing of the Vice-General's letter may have been deadly for George's candidacy. Many of his allies thought so and subsequently blamed the Catholic hierarchy for his loss (O'Donnell 232-4, 238).

Not long after the mayoral election, Father McGlynn was quoted in the papers criticizing the church and advocating in favor of the Single Tax. Archbishop Corrigan responded with another suspension and appealed to the Vatican for disciplinary action. The Vatican summoned McGlynn to Rome for an explanation of his position on private property, but he refused, claiming a heart condition made travel unwise. In the meantime, the archbishop assigned a new pastor to McGlynn's parish and pushed for

George's books to be placed on the Index of Forbidden Books. At the urging of Henry George, many St. Stephen's parishioners retaliated against the diocese by withholding their money from the collection plate or even boycotting Mass completely. Less than six months later, news arrived from Rome: McGlynn had been excommunicated, possibly due more directly to his refusal to answer the Vatican's summons than his theology or politics (O'Donnell 246-8, 255).

After the mayoral election and McGlynn's excommunication, the coalition Henry George had built quickly began to collapse. Many, though not all, Catholic supporters were disheartened by the excommunication and gradually moved away from Georgian positions. Infighting tore apart the United Labor Party, but not before George was expelled in 1888 for supporting Grover Cleveland for President. McGlynn also split with George over Cleveland and may have played a role in George's expulsion from the party (O'Donnell 255-6, 277-8).

Two more significant actions on the part of the church would pertain to Henry George. The first was the 1891 promulgation of Pope Leo XIII's encyclical on capital and labor, *Rerum Novarum*. The second was the eventual restoration of Father McGlynn to good standing within the church. In *Rerum Novarum*, Leo XIII recognized inequality and poverty as among the greatest problems of the era. He also argued for trade unions, advanced the concept of a living wage not based only on a free-market consensus, and recognized a fundamental right of workers to strike. However, Leo XIII also reaffirmed the right to private property—including land ownership—as sacred if not unlimited, sharply criticizing economic theories that sought to eliminate it. For Henry George, the redeeming aspects of *Rerum Novarum* were far outweighed by this last

point. He wrote a long open letter in response, reiterating many arguments he had made already in *Progress and Poverty* and elsewhere in opposition to the private ownership of natural resources and in support of his Single Tax position (George, "Condition of Labor"; O'Donnell 279; *Rerum Novarum*; Weigel 15-24).

Scholars have pointed out that the greatest obstacle to agreement between George and the church was their difference in philosophical frames of reference. Although George went against established political thought in the United States, he was also the product of an atmosphere dominated by Enlightenment era political thinkers such as Locke and Jefferson (Benestad 115). Meanwhile, Leo XIII was operating in a tradition of medieval philosophy that took its cues from Saint Thomas Aquinas (Weigel 20). Because their basic assumptions about the nature of property were opposed, George stood little chance of convincing the pope of his position. Nevertheless, in his letter to Leo XIII, George did attempt to speak to the pope in his own terminology. In various sections of his letter, George referenced Aquinas, the Jesuit order, Saint Thomas Beckett, Bishop Thomas Nulty, and an assortment of biblical figures and themes (George, "Condition of Labor"). His letter to the pope in response to *Rerum Novarum* is fundamentally religious in nature and demonstrates an awareness of his intended audience.

In the most relevant section of his letter to Leo XIII, George identified eight of the pope's justifications for private land ownership, then extensively refuted each one. Of these justifications, the fifth is the most interesting. In the final passage of paragraph eleven of the encyclical, Leo XIII argues that property is divinely sanctioned, and quotes "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's..." from the Ten Commandments in support. Part of

George's response to this point is to compare private property in land ownership to slavery (which he also does in an earlier section of the open letter). Assuming Leo XIII understands the command not to covet one's neighbor's field to justify private property in land, George claimed, one could just as easily use the mandate not to covet man-servants and maid-servants to "sanction chattel slavery." It is unlikely that the pope would have found this comparison particularly compelling. Leo XIII recognized slavery as an injury to a person and would not have shared George's view of private land ownership as an assault on the poor (George, "Condition of Labor"; *Rerum Novarum*).

George goes on to quote scripture against the ownership of land: "The land also shall not be sold forever: because it is mine, and you are strangers and sojourners with me" (qtd. in George, "Condition of Labor"). At first glance, this argument seems promising to convince Leo XIII of George's position. However, the Catholic Church taught—and still does teach—that people do not truly own their own bodies on a metaphysical level, but that bodies are gifts from God—just like the rest of creation (Coulter 878-9). George's argument was therefore fundamentally flawed if he wanted to convince the pope of his position. If God's ultimate ownership were grounds to reject practical control and ownership on the part of individuals, the church would have been forced to preach against all forms of property. Given that George accepted other kinds of property as the fruits of one's labor, his position is self-contradictory from the Catholic perspective (Benestad 116; George, "Condition of Labor").

George's letter received no official response, and it is unclear exactly how much of an effect it had on Pope Leo XIII, if he even read it. The letter caught the attention of Daniel DeLeon of the Socialist Labor Party of America, who argued that *Rerum*

Novarum really had nothing to do with the Single Tax at all. He claimed the real target of the encyclical was socialism. Before engaging in his attack on *Rerum Novarum*, DeLeon mocked George, describing him as a “Democratic turn coat,” with “tall conceit that sets in relief his small stature” (DeLeon 1). DeLeon’s personal dislike of George is partly explained by the fact that George had purged the Socialists from the United Labor Party, shortly before he himself was forced out (O’Donnell 259).

At this point, it appeared the defeat of Henry George’s ideas was complete among both socialists and Catholics. Then, in 1892, he was pleasantly surprised to learn that Father McGlynn had been reinstated by the church. It seemed the priest had finally made the trip to Rome and met with the pope to explain himself and his position in detail. He also brought along a written explanation of the Single Tax and his theological positions. After a commission of theologians analyzed these documents, they found McGlynn to be free of abject heresy. Leo XIII lifted the excommunication (O’Donnell 279; “Pope Leo” 668).

Many interpreted the lifting of McGlynn’s excommunication as a great victory for Henry George, but the conflict’s conclusion was more ambiguous. The pope made no official pronouncement on the Single Tax, save that it was not blatantly heretical as a policy position—not exactly a ringing endorsement. Presumably, fully restoring McGlynn would have included a promise to cease his open engagement in partisan campaigns in violation of canon law. The issue of the philosophical position underlying the Single Tax seems to have been unaddressed, making it unclear if Father McGlynn moderated his position on the theoretical issue of private land ownership to regain his standing. Regardless, Single Taxers celebrated the decision to lift McGlynn’s excommunication

as a huge victory. As for Henry George, he joined in the celebratory attitude toward the restoration of McGlynn, but the two were still estranged and the commission had not made a ruling on his ideas (Benestad 116-7; O'Donnell 279; "Pope Leo" 668). While bishops like Corrigan hoped for a condemnation of the Single Tax as a policy and were disappointed, George and his allies would have preferred a papal endorsement—which was never going to happen. Neither outcome came to pass, and despite the attempted spinning of the issue on both sides, it was an anticlimactic and unsatisfying finale to an engrossing conflict.

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