

# Faculty of Public Health Medicine Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother Lecture

## Foreword

To mark the 90th birthday of their Patron, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, the Trustees of the Nuffield Trust agreed to sponsor an annual public lecture under the aegis of the Faculty of Public Health Medicine. This is to be given by an eminent worker of any discipline, resident and working in the UK on a topic embraced within the main theme of 'Public Health'.

It is necessary for all of us working within public health to be challenged by somebody from outside who is recognised for his stand on ethical and social issues and is well known for his championing of liberal causes. Richard Holloway, Primus of the Episcopal Church in Scotland, presents in this lecture a diagnosis of the human condition reflecting on key issues of concern to public health, including social exclusion and the use of drugs. In suggesting remedy and therapy he points to both the more radical action which is a strategic change in employment, education, housing and social welfare but recognises that there is also more immediate action that can ameliorate distress.

Those working in public health need to be open, be willing to review their attitude and be committed to action. He concludes by warning 'One of the main dangers to the health of our nation is the way power hijacks our very thought processes, so that we deny ourselves the right to think creatively about the problems that confront us'.

John Wyn Owen, CB

James McEwen, PFPHM

The Most Reverend  
Richard F. Holloway BD, STM,  
D.UNIV., DD, FRSE  
Bishop of Edinburgh and  
Primus of the Scottish  
Episcopal Church

Richard Holloway was born in Glasgow, 26 November 1933, and raised in The Vale of Leven. He is married to Jean, and has two daughters and a son. He was educated in Scotland, England and the USA. Ordained in 1959, he worked in Glasgow till 1968, where he was for seven years a member of the Gorbals Group.

He was Rector of Old St Paul's, Edinburgh, from 1968 until 1980, when he was appointed Rector of the Church of the Advent in Boston, Massachusetts, where he was for four years. From 1984-86 he was Vicar of St Mary Magdalen's, Oxford. In 1986 he was consecrated Bishop of Edinburgh and in 1992 elected Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church.

Bishop Holloway has been involved with voluntary organisations for many years and is an active patron of many organisations in the voluntary sector. He was a member of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority from its inception in 1990 until 1997, and was chairman of the BMA Steering Committee on Genetics. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and is currently Gresham Professor of Divinity in the City of London.

Bishop Holloway is well-known for his championing of liberal causes, and is called upon frequently to comment on ethical matters that capture the public interest. He has written for a number of newspapers in Britain and is a frequent broadcaster. He is the author of numerous books and his most recent books *Dancing on the Edge* (1997) and *Godless Morality* (1999) caused considerable controversy when they were published.

## The Rag and Bone Shop of the Heart

When the poet, W. B. Yeats, was an old man he thought that he had lost the gift of poetry. He brooded on the fact that, when younger, the images of inspiration, what he called his circus animals, had come to him unbidden; but now they seemed to have deserted him.

*I sought a theme and  
sought for it in vain,  
I sought it daily for six weeks or so.  
Maybe at last being but a  
broken man  
I must be satisfied with my  
heart, although  
Winter and summer till old age  
began  
My circus animals were all on  
show.*

Gradually, he realises that it was, all along, his own heart that was the source of his inspiration, and not some exalted sphere beyond himself. So he must get back inside himself, back to where all the ladders of effort and inspiration start, like someone struggling to lift himself out of a slum. The poem ends:

*Now that my ladder's gone  
I must lie down where all the  
ladders start*

*In the foul rag and bone shop of  
the heart.*

It is the heart, our inner self, that is the root of many of our problems; but it is equally true that it is the heart that provides their solution. That's where all the ladders have to start, and it is where I want to start today, as I try to offer some kind of analysis of where we are as a human community in this country. I want to offer a diagnosis of the human condition, before suggesting remedy or therapy, an order of proceeding that seems appropriate before an audience of the Faculty of Public Health Medicine. I understand that the arts of diagnosis and therapy are not necessarily found in the same person. I have heard some doctors described as brilliant diagnosticians, others as natural physicians. Let me borrow that distinction and apply it to the analysis of the human project in these final months of the second millennium.

One of the most searching diagnosticians of the human condition was Karl Marx. Dr Marx was a lousy therapist, and no society today really tries to follow his prescriptions; but his diagnosis of human social pathology is still powerful and searching. He understood how the foul rag and

bone shop of the heart of society functioned, so his analysis is a good place to start climbing our ladder. His main insights, like most brilliant perceptions, once you get hold of them, are startlingly simple. The central claim is that power always justifies itself, not necessarily by brute force, though it is rarely reluctant to do that, but by theories or ideas. That is why the ruling ideas in any era always justify the position of the ruling class, they are always used to legitimate the way things are done by the people in charge. And what they are in charge of does not, for the moment, matter: it can be anything, from a whole nation down to a university or a hospital or a school or a family. It is important to understand that this is not necessarily an accusatory insight, though it is a critical one. A moment's thought will show how obvious and necessary it is for any institution to be able to justify itself to itself, if it is to continue to operate effectively and not paralyse itself into critical gridlock. The importance of the Marxist insight is that, by helping us to understand how institutions work, it puts us in a better position to strive for their improvement, or, where necessary, their complete transformation. And there is another insight that is worth entering here. All cultures or

institutions achieve stability by a necessary process of internalised self-justification. Societies inevitably justify themselves to themselves, but when they begin to do it angrily or defensively it is usually because they are on the cusp of radical change. That is why, when we start passionately justifying the status quo, it is usually because we know in our hearts that it cannot be long sustained.

Since it is easier to see this kind of thing operating elsewhere than in our own institutions; since it is easier, in the language of Jesus, to see the speck in our brother's eye rather than the beam that is in our own, let us look at some examples. Those of us who admire the sanity and moderation of the philosopher Aristotle, also have to acknowledge the fact that he developed a theoretical justification for slavery, because it was in the economic self-interest of the ruling class in ancient Greece, the class to which he belonged. Those of us who admire the sanity and moderation of the theologian St Thomas Aquinas, himself a great lover of Aristotle, have to acknowledge that he gave divine sanction to absolute monarchy and to serfdom, because it was in the economic self-interest of the leaders of 13th century Europe to do so. This attitude hung around for a long time in Christian theology, and

was popularly expressed in Mrs Alexander's well-known hymn,

*The rich man in his castle,  
The poor man at his gate,  
God made them high or lowly,  
And ordered their estate.*

The tell-tale phrase is, 'God made them high or lowly', and it is important to note that there is no relativising comma after, 'God made them'. We are told that 'God made them high or lowly', established them in an order that was fixed and unalterable. In other words, the division of society into classes, into the rich and into the poor, is not an accident of history or the result of straightforward exploitation of the weak by the strong: it is the way God has designed things. Tough if you draw the short straw, but who are you to criticise your maker?

Now let me offer an example from our time, from within my own Church. When we were debating whether to ordain women, the thing that frustrated us most in our debate with those who opposed it was not that the men in charge said honestly that they did not want to share power with women, or that they liked all the male language about God in the Bible, because it confirmed their own sense of the metaphysical superiority of the

male urinary tract - there would have been a certain kind of honesty in that, and the laughter it provoked might itself have been cleansing and transforming. But that's not what they said. They said, 'We ourselves have no prejudices against women; indeed, if it were up to us, we would alter things to accommodate their obvious frustrations; unfortunately, God has different ideas. He has fixed these fundamental gender distinctions for ever, and who are we to fight against God?' Marx would have slapped his thigh with delight at that claim, because it is a perfect illustration of his thesis that people in power always find theoretical ways of justifying their self-interest.

If we can accept the claim, if only for the sake of argument, that ruling elites always consolidate their position by creating a doctrinal justification for it in society as a whole, how does social evolution ever occur? Where does the impetus to move on and challenge accepted values come from? Hegel would have answered that the spirit of history itself, the mystical reality that animates the whole of time, evolves gradually towards human liberty. Marx borrowed the evolutionary idea, but said that it worked itself out through changes in the means of production, creating greater social complexity and an

accompanying misery and despair that provoked challenge and change. Now, you don't have to buy the mysticism to recognise that history has, in fact, worked out like that. The point I want to derive from this is that, at some moment during the evolution of any human institution, a challenge is made against its ruling ideas by those who are its victims. I was shown a poignant reminder of this struggle for reform some time ago in a flat in the New Town of Edinburgh. When the owner was installing a new kitchen, he found a child's boot stuck up inside the chimney, a pathetically worn reminder that Victorian Edinburgh sent children up its chimneys to clean them. It was the legislation against child labour and the factory acts that put paid to that kind of exploitation, but the reforms were opposed every step of the way by those who profited from a system that virtually enslaved children. And lest we are beginning to feel a bit smug about our own enlightenment, it is worth remembering how opposed the Royal Colleges and the BMA were to the emergence of the National Health Service, so that, to quote his own words, Nye Bevan had to stuff the mouths of the doctors with gold in order to get the main elements of his reforms through.

Ruling elites always disguise their own self-interest in the language of theory and necessity. That's the main point I want to make. An interesting example is provided by Kenneth Galbraith in his book, *The Good Society*. He writes of modern global capitalism: *There is the inescapable fact that the modern market economy accords wealth and distributes income in a highly unequal, socially adverse and also functionally damaging fashion.* Galbraith is well aware of the efficacy of the market economy at generating wealth, but he is concerned at the way those who benefit from the system refuse to address the damaging effects it has on the most vulnerable members of society. He points out that the market system constantly has to respond to two inevitable consequences of its own success, inflation and unemployment. These are both damaging realities, but those who benefit from the system tend to identify inflation as the greater evil, because it touches them, whereas they treat unemployment as the lesser evil, because it touches the poor. This, Galbraith claims, is a good example of how the powerful adjust theories to suit their own privileges. He argues that in the good society there would be a trade-off between these two evils, so that we would be prepared to tolerate a moderate level of inflation

as a price worth paying for getting more people into work. Thoughtful people ought to be concerned about the effects of the global market economy on human communities. Geoff Mulgan says that one of the paradoxes of our day is that, while a third of working-age men are now estimated to be out of work or underemployed world-wide, the elite of brokers, professionals and officials work around the clock. A century ago overwork was a sign of poverty, now it is a sign of wealth.

Most unprejudiced thinkers would acknowledge the failures as well as the successes of the global market economy. Few people today argue for its complete abolition. Increasingly, however, people are calling for a candid acknowledgement of its failures. 'We created the thing', they say, 'so why can't we learn to modify or correct it?' And we have started doing this in certain areas. We have learnt comparatively recently about the cost to the planet of unregulated industrial activity, so we no longer tolerate businesses that pollute our rivers and destroy the quality of the air we breathe. So far, however, we are uncertain about how to respond to the adverse effects of the global market economy on the human environment. All I am suggesting here is that, since self-interest always

justifies itself to itself, we should work hard at trying to understand how the system that benefits us, consequentially damages or destroys many other lives in the process. The word Jesus used to describe this process is, in Greek, *metanoia*. It is usually, and misleadingly, translated as *repentance*, but it actually means a deep switch in thinking of the sort that racists have to go through, if they are to change their attitude towards people of other races; or misogynists, if they are to change their attitude towards women; or homophobes, if they are to shift their attitudes towards gay and lesbian people. All the ladders to a better society start here, in this painful process of radical re-appraisal. And the main fact we have to acknowledge is that the system that has made most of us more prosperous has plunged a significant proportion of our fellow citizens into poverty and despair.

One of the most tragically enduring facts of the history of human industry is that change in the methods of production always has a disproportionate impact upon the most vulnerable in society. History, like nature, seems to be indifferent to the pain it causes the weak. Think of the way the industrial revolution chewed up and spat out generations of the poor, before we learned how to

protect them from its worst depredations. The paradox of our time is that it is the death of heavy industry that is now devastating the poor. In a recent essay, David Donnison claimed that in Scotland we are in the midst of a massive social disaster, and Glasgow is its epicentre. 'Nearly three fifths - 58% - of the most deprived tenth of the post-code districts of Scotland are in this city. 37% of Glasgow's households with children in them have no-one in a paid job, and 27% have only one adult'. Poverty is heavily concentrated in and around Glasgow, but other cities have their share, including bustling, prosperous Edinburgh. Much of this is the consequence of global economic changes, coupled with the closure of pits and defence industries. Heavy industry has been replaced by the knowledge economy, and we are only now trying to catch up with its consequential impact upon the poor and ill-educated. And, as if that were not enough, social change has combined with the economic revolution to destroy the cultural cohesion of the most vulnerable sections of our society. When the culture revolutions of the Sixties met and married the economic revolution of the Eighties, there was created a potent instrument of social change that has transformed the

social landscape of Britain, and its most devastating impact has been upon young, ill-educated workless males. The institutions that once gave them a motive for responsible living, such as holding down a tough, demanding job with its own culture and honour, and presiding, however clumsily, within a marriage and family that was the primary context for the nurture and socialising of children, have largely disappeared, and with them the main ways the human community traditionally disciplined and integrated what the Prayer Book calls, 'the unruly wills and affections of sinful men'. This shattering of the structures that once gave the poor significance and purpose has created a breeding ground for despair that prompts the kind of destructive behaviour that continually reinforces their alienation. Whenever I refer to these facts in certain circles someone inevitably points out that no one in Britain is starving today, because absolute poverty has been eradicated. That may be technically true, but minority poverty has an exclusionary cruelty that is all its own. When most people were poor there was a camaraderie and cultural cohesion in belonging to the working class that gave them a strength and pride that transcended the structures that excluded them. But in a society where



most people are prosperous, and the poor are a minority whose culture has disintegrated, the pain and anger they feel is heightened.

It is the mark of a humane and civilised society to acknowledge this pain and try to tackle the factors that produce it, though generations are always sacrificed while we learn to make the necessary adjustments to the great engine of change that drives its way through time. Because the Government has acknowledged that the endurance of poverty in a prosperous society is a scandal, we are currently embarked upon an ambitious programme to tackle the tragedy created by the revolutions of our time. We have acknowledged that the system that benefits most of us has had the unintended effect of excluding many of our fellow citizens, so we have to learn to correct that tragic imbalance. The paradoxical thing is that the energy for this reform is coming from those in power, from whom, according to classic Marxist theory, we ought to expect self-justificatory rhetoric, rather than a whole raft of programmes designed to tackle the spiritual and social erosions of poverty. Another interesting thing about the Government's determination to end poverty and social exclusion is that the programme of change no longer

conforms to the old prescriptions of the Left, though it is clearly prompted by the Left's traditional passion for a more equal society. It has been argued that the Left won the ethical or cultural argument in Britain, but that the Right won the economic argument. The market economy has been shown to be the best instrument for the creation of prosperous societies, even though the prosperity is not universally enjoyed. It has occurred to the new Left that this engine of the market, steered carefully, might be used to drive towards a more fair and equal society. So, with brilliant effrontery, they have united the two ideas together in Holy Matrimony. It's as though the Left wing daughter of the shop steward at the Mill, fresh from the London School of Economics, and determined to do something about life in the Valley for her people, has married the owner's son, a nice lad, good at making money, a bit challenged intellectually, but mesmerised by the charm and cleverness of his unexpected bride.

All people of good will must pray that the project will succeed in bettering the lot of the excluded. We know that they lead shorter and less satisfying lives than the rest of us; that their health is worse, yet they are less well served by the health service; that

many of them go through the education system with little benefit, so they are heavily handicapped in their attempts to find work; and we know that they are more prone to those devastating addictions that are such a feature of our complex society. So the intention behind the Government's anti-poverty campaign has to be commended, but that does not mean that we should refrain from critical analysis of the methods used, nor that we should retire Dr Marx because we have nothing left to learn from him. His central diagnostic insight is still helpful, though we may have to apply it in a subtler way. The domination system is more likely to be spiritual today; we are more likely to be imposing a moral or cultural agenda on the poor, because we are convinced that we know what is good for them. This is the way power is likely to be expressing itself in our society today, so our interrogation of ourselves will have to probe our hearts and their best intentions.

A good way to begin to think about this is to review our attitude to the handicapped. I'll start with another piece of institutional confession. E. M. Forster once talked about 'poor little talkative Christianity'. He was right; Christians are a wordy lot and our churches are filled with speech; it is our main

medium of communication. If you are deaf, I wonder how you got on the last time you went to church. Could you make any sense of it? Was a loop system involved, so that you could plug into the sermon, or ostentatiously unplug it if it was drivel? Last time you were at a meeting, was it arranged so that you could read the lips of the speakers? Deafness is profoundly isolating, yet with a little organisation, and the minimum of technology, much can be done to alleviate it. We are far more aware of this than we were, but we continue to put enormous obstacles in the way of the deaf community. It is not because we do not care, it is because dominant majorities always take their own situation to be normative, and have to be challenged by minority communities to transcend their own assumptions. Sometimes that challenge is angry and peremptory, because the experience of the minority community is often one of devastating rejection. The same is true of other kinds of handicap. We have all met physically handicapped people of high intelligence and enormous strength of character. Authority has often assumed that they were idiots, not intelligent people. They tell stories of their battles to get people to recognise that handicap is as much a social construction as a set of

personal limitations. It is taken for granted that they will have to lead boringly protected lives, after unsatisfactory experiences in special schools. When society gets out of its dominant mindset and empowers the handicapped by removing artificial restrictions and by creating an environment that maximises their potential, their presence enormously enriches the rest of us. It is not as though they are asking us to do a lot for them; rather, they are asking us to get out of their way, so that they can do a lot for themselves. Shaking ourselves loose from the kind of imperialistic thinking I have been describing is difficult; but it won't happen at all unless we lead examined lives, both personally and institutionally.

In conclusion, I would like to look briefly at a controversial topic that provides us with another example of the imprisoning force of a ruling idea. I have argued that the social and economic revolution of our time has created a community of pain which knows that it is excluded from the prosperity and privilege the rest of us enjoy. Its alienation and despair are routes to addiction and crime. Sex and drugs are not only classic ways of escaping misery, they offer the poor access to some sort of economic status, however dangerous and

temporary. If you are excluded from official economic life, you are likely to be forced into the unofficial economy, which includes prostitution and drug dealing. These are demeaning professions, made worse by their criminality. But we must try to capture something of the cruelty of the paradox we ourselves have created. We have constructed an economic system that systemically excludes whole sections of our society. In their anger and despair they turn to drugs or the sex industry. And we, with a kind of surreal logic, compound their misery by telling them that their escape routes are against our law, and that their mind-altering substances of choice are not ones we approve of. So we arrest them and send them to institutions that are awash in the very substances they are being gaoled for using or dealing in. No one will want to dispute the fact that drugs can destroy lives. It is worth noting, however, that legal drugs are probably more dangerous than illegal ones. In Britain, alcohol is involved in 65% of murders, 75% of stabbings, 40% of acts of domestic violence, 30% of acts of child abuse, not to mention the 600 killed and thousands injured in drink-drive accidents every year. There are 1,800 deaths from illegal substances each year, compared with 33,000 that are

related to the use of alcohol. In Scotland the figures for illegal drug, alcohol and tobacco related deaths in 1994, a typical year, were, respectively, 247, 720 and 10,420. I don't think there is a universal solution to the problem of substance abuse, apart from a massive reduction in poverty and the low self-esteem it induces. And even prosperous people can be sucked into addiction and misery. What seems to me to be unhelpful is the way we bring the criminal justice system to bear on a complex area of human choice that calls for great understanding and flexibility of response. Our current policy on drugs is an example not of sane and balanced thinking on a complex subject, but of the power of a ruling idea to dictate to others how they should lead their private lives. It is all a bit like the war in Lilliput, in *Gulliver's Travels*, between Big Enders and Little Enders, who fought over the right way to open an egg.

The tragedy of systemic social exclusion will only be ended after years of strategic change in employment, education, housing and social welfare, but there are some areas in which ameliorative change could be achieved fairly quickly, and drugs policy is a good example. Politicians are a cautious breed who

do not like to be too far ahead of public opinion. That is why there is little reasoned discussion on the best way to respond to contemporary drug culture, with particular reference to its impact on the most wretched elements in our society. It strikes me as a highly appropriate issue for the Faculty of Public Health Medicine, which is in an ideal position to challenge the damaging power of a dominant idea. The Scottish Office of the BMA has taken a cautious initiative in this direction by presenting a motion at the Annual Representatives' meeting of the BMA this week. Motion 389 reads: *That the BMA should support the legalisation of cannabis for medicinal and recreational use.* The important thing about that motion is not the drug issue itself, but the challenge to official thinking which it represents. One of the main dangers to the health of our nation is the way power hijacks our very thought processes, so that we deny ourselves the right to think creatively about the problems that confront us. Plato said that the unexamined life was not worth living. I hope that the distinguished body you represent will further the health of the nation by helping us, at every level of society, to live the examined life.