



Saltire Series No.1

A PLEA
FOR A SECULAR
SCOTLAND

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Editorial Note

In the Saltire Series we have invited individuals to spark fresh thinking, ignite debate and challenge our orthodoxies, through the publication of short commissioned essays. The Editorial note from a pamphlet produced in 1942 is still a strong expression of the proposition.

'They will express the considered judgements of their own authors, to whom complete freedom has been given; and are not to be taken as representing the policy of the Saltire Society, whose objective is to promote that free and informed discussion without which no sound policy for Scotland's future can be shaped.'

A PLEA FOR A SECULAR SCOTLAND **by Richard Holloway**

J.M.Coetzee begins his novel *Diary of a Bad Year* with a sceptical meditation on the formation of the state. These are the novel's opening words:

Every account of the origins of the state starts from the premise that 'we' – not we the readers but some generic we so wide as to exclude no one – participate in its coming into being. But the fact is that the only 'we' we know – ourselves and the people close to us – are born into the state; and our forebears too were born into the state as far back as we can trace. The state is always there before us.

Then he quotes Thomas Hobbes, one of the classic thinkers on the origin of the state, who saw it as a contract we enacted in order to protect ourselves from ourselves:

...outside the commonwealth is the empire of the passions, war, fear, poverty, nastiness, solitude, barbarity, ignorance, savagery; within the commonwealth is the empire of reason, peace, security, wealth, splendour, society, good taste, the sciences and good will.

Commenting on this passage, Coetzee writes:

What the Hobbesian myth of origins does not mention is that the handover of power to the state is irreversible. The option is not open to us to change our minds, to decide that the monopoly on the exercise of force held by the state, codified in the law, is not what we wanted after all, that we would prefer to go back to a state of nature. We are born subject. From the moment of our birth we are subject.

Another thinker who, like Hobbes, believed in the necessity of the state to control human savagery was Sigmund Freud. Here he is in *Civilization and Its Discontents*:

Human life in common is only made possible when a majority comes together which is stronger than any separate individual and which remains united against all separate individuals. The power of this community is then set up as 'right' in opposition to the power of the individual, which is condemned as 'brute force'. This replacement of the power of the individual by the power of the community constitutes the decisive step of civilization.

In another essay, *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud discusses what would happen if we abandoned the social contract and returned to the state of nature. He writes:

What would then remain would be a state of nature, and that would be far harder to bear. It is true that nature would not demand any restrictions of instinct from us, she would let us do as we liked; but she has her own particularly effective method of restricting us. She destroys us - coldly, cruelly, relentlessly, as it seems to us, and possibly through the very things that occasioned our satisfaction. It was precisely because of these dangers with which nature threatens us that we came together and created civilisation, which is also, among other things, intended to make our communal life possible. For the principal task of civilization, its actual *raison d'être*, is to defend us against nature.

The last sentence in that quotation bears repetition: ‘...the principal task of civilization, its actual *raison d’être* is to defend us against nature’. I’ve no idea whether Coetzee ever commented on these words of Freud, but it is not hard to imagine what he might have said. He would have pointed out that the trouble with civilization or the state or the commonwealth – to give it its various labels - is that it is not exempt from the human vices it was invented to discipline and control. In fact, it can concentrate and amplify them so horribly that we end up in a state far worse than anything we observe in nature itself.

An insight into how this happens is found in another book. In *The Philosopher and the Wolf* Mark Rowlands describes how a wolf he adopted dominated his life till its death ten years later, and prompted him to reflect on the difference between the simian and lupine personalities, the contrast between apes and wolves. We are apes, the most intelligent of an intelligent species, top of the simian chain. At some point apes took an evolutionary turn that wolves did not and became social animals – which may even be the source of the myth of the social contract. Rowlands observes that while living in groups shapes the capacity to develop protective alliances, it also shapes the ability to scheme and deceive. Indeed, scheming and deception seem to be at the core of the type of intelligence that developed in apes and reached its apotheosis in *homo sapiens*, the king of the apes. Apes are intuitively political. Wolves never went down this path. In the wolf pack there is little scheming and deception; little, if any, premeditation: life is lived in the urgent primacy of the now. But because of the kind of intelligence that evolved in the human ape, we can do things that wolves could never dream of. We can build cathedrals and compose symphonies and write poems and create complex social, religious and political institutions; but the shadow cast by this brightness is our capacity for deception, conspiracy, complexity and cruelty, especially when we are operating at the collective level. The American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote a book called *Moral Man, Immoral Society* to remind us of the viciousness and cruelty that ordinary men are capable of when they become a mob, and we know how easy it is for the mentality of the mob to take over a state. That is why we should maintain a profound suspicion towards the state and an enduring scepticism about its claim to be our protector. There are too many examples of the state lynching powerless individuals in the name of a higher purpose that turns out to be a great evil.

Let me recall an example from my days as an anti-apartheid campaigner in the 1960s. There was a South African boxer called Ronnie van der Walt who was the golden boy of white boxing fans in that racist state. He had knocked out a contender for the world welter-weight title and seemed to be on his way to boxing glory. One night, just before he was to fight another white boxer, his name was inked out of the programme and his picture was stripped from the walls. Had he fought that night he would have gone to gaol. His boxing career was over, because the South African government had reclassified him as coloured and banned him from fighting white men in the ring. As Ronnie remembered it, ‘The inspector walked around us peering at us from every angle like you do when you buy an animal. He said nothing, just looked’. Soon Ronnie got a letter telling him that at 29 he had been reclassified as coloured. That meant he could no longer box for a living, live in a white neighbourhood or send his children to a white school. The state had pulled up his life like a weed from the roadside, and protesting was useless. After pointing out that he was the grandson of Johannes van der Welt, a great Afrikaans wrestler, he added. ‘They can’t just cut me down like a bloody tree. For God’s sake, I am a man’. Those words have stayed in my mind ever since because they express the experience of millions of ordinary, unknown individuals who have been sacrificed by the state’s addiction to control and separation. Here’s another example, this one closer to home.

Let me remind you that until 1967 - 1980 in Scotland - it was a criminal offence in Britain for a man to have sex with another man, and the full power of the law was visited upon anyone who dared break the law. Our so-called free and democratic state destroyed the lives of thousands of gay men and cut them down like trees. Here's a single example from the crowded annals of the homophobic British state. Alan Turing was a brilliant mathematician and pioneer of computer science. During World War II he worked at the Government Code and Cipher School at Bletchley Park, where he helped to break the German naval ciphers - the famous Enigma Code - and thereby helped to shorten the war. Turing, who was gay, was arrested in 1952 and charged with a criminal sexual offence. The judge gave him the option of going to prison or being chemically castrated with injections of female hormone. He opted for chemical castration, but the effects were so devastating and undermining that rather than go on living with the humiliation he committed suicide in 1954.

All states, including our own fabled democracy, arrogate to themselves the right to cut down unique individuals like that if it suits them. And the thing to notice about this arrogance of power, especially in so-called 'advanced' democratic states, is that while the state has always been happy to impose its dictates by force it has also sought to justify them with theory, including religious theory. So what I want to do in the rest of this essay is recall the Christian religion's record for supplying transcendental justification for laws and customs we now reject as evil. At the root of Christianity's complicity in the evils of the state lies a theology of authority that makes Hobbes and Freud sound like raving optimists. Let me remind you of Freud's words: "Human life in common is only made possible when a majority comes together which is stronger than any separate individual and which remains united against all separate individuals. The power of this community is then set up as 'right' in opposition to the power of the individual, which is condemned as 'brute force'." Here's how Saint Paul put it:

Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive damnation to themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works...but if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Romans 13.1-4.

*He is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil...*What is troubling to anyone who knows even a little religious history is the way the wrath of God has been executed upon people once defined as evil whom we would now define as good; and even more troubling is the way religion has been used to sanctify as good institutions we would now define as evil, such as slavery and the racist theory that justified it. In his Edinburgh Gifford Lectures of 2012, now published as a book called *Silence: A Christian History*, the historian Diarmaid MacCulloch describes the origins of a racist theory that is still current in the USA. It is based on the story of the temptation of Eve by the serpent in Genesis.

Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he saith unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden? ...God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil. Genesis 3.1-5.

Before looking at the racist spin that was later put upon this story, it is worth reminding ourselves that for centuries it was also used to justify the oppression of women. Adam blamed Eve when God discovered that the original couple had eaten the forbidden fruit: 'The woman gave me and I did eat', he moaned like the man he was, thereby laying the blame for all

subsequent human misery on woman. So from the language of that ancient myth was spun a whole theory of the danger of woman to male rectitude. Here's a 4th Century saint on the subject:

What else is woman but a foe to friendship, an inescapable punishment, a necessary evil, a natural temptation, a desirable calamity, a domestic danger, a delectable detriment, an evil painted with faint colours!

With a psychic virus like that lurking in its DNA, no wonder Christianity has been so reluctant to emancipate women - not that their position is noticeably better in the other Abrahamic religions of Judaism and Islam.

But let me get back to racism and that serpent. In 1810 a Methodist scholar called Adam Clarke wondered if the serpent – *nachash* in Hebrew – might not have been some kind of ape. This entirely groundless speculation provoked the scorn of serious biblical scholars, but it was grabbed by racists in the USA who went on to identify the Negro with the ape in the frame. MacCulloch comments:

In the age of Charles Darwin, some American defenders of Negro slavery saw it as potentially offering a... scientific and respectable and cogent explanation of Negro origins...In effect, since the Negro was not fully human, there was no slavery of human beings in the South, and abolitionists were wasting their breath.

But slave holders did not have to rely on the Old Testament alone for support for their cause - the New Testament did an even better job for them. Here's MacCulloch again:

The distressing fact for modern Christians...is that slavery is taken for granted in the Bible, even if it is not always considered to be a good thing, at least for oneself. One would have had to be exceptionally independent-minded and intellectually awkward to face up to the consensus of every philosopher in the ancient world, and the first Christians did not rise to the challenge. Paul's Epistle to Philemon, in which the Apostle asks his correspondent to allow him the continued services of Philemon's slave Onesimus, is a Christian foundation document in the justification of slavery.

So, who first found the courage to challenge the authority of the Bible and denounce slavery as evil? Well, it was not the Evangelicals who preen themselves on being the first abolitionists. MacCulloch names Pennsylvanian Quakers of 1688 as the first in the game. And what is significant is how they went about it. Here's MacCulloch again:

Quakers...believed in the prime authority of the 'inner light'. Many of their earliest activists...had through their sharp critique of the problems of the scriptural text, pioneered the modern Enlightenment discipline of biblical criticism...The Quakers disrespect for the established conventions of biblical authority was the reason that they could take a fresh perspective on biblical authority and reject it. It took original minds to kick against the authority of sacred Scriptures. What was needed was a prior conviction in one's conscience of the wrongness of slavery, which one might then decide to justify by a purposeful re-examination of the Bible.

What was needed was a prior conviction in one's conscience of the wrongness of slavery...Savour those words for a moment to grasp the importance of what had happened.

The problem with basing morality on an ancient text revealed by God as an enduring guide to conduct is that it locks you into the social and scientific world-view of the time of its provenance; and the reason it has been so hard for Christianity to ditch attitudes that secular society thinks are antediluvian is that they are seen not as the dated arrangements of Bronze Age society but as eternal norms. So you have to admire the courage of those Pennsylvanian Quakers who knew the difference between what was right and what the Bible said was right. For them slavery was wrong even if the Bible appeared to justify it, the implication being that the Bible was a human not a divine creation. That was the beginning of the process that led to the Enlightenment, when light bulbs switched on in people's heads and they looked at religion's sacred books and said to themselves, why should we bind ourselves to what these ancient texts tell us when our own sense of justice is outraged by what they say? From now on we will judge them like any other human text, winnowing the chaff from the wheat, the evil from the good - and thus the secular state was born.

The word secular comes from the Latin *saecularis*, pertaining to a *saeculum* or age. An example of its use was the *ludi saeculares* in ancient Rome, the *secular games*, so called because they took place once a *saeculum* - or every hundred years. But language is dynamic and never stays still, and the history of this word is a case in point. The distinction that gradually emerged was between time and eternity, between this world, where everything is in constant flux with age succeeding age, and heaven where there is no successiveness, only an endless present, a single changeless moment. By the Middle Ages the term secular was being used to refer to the world and its transient order, in contrast to the Church which was seen as an imperial outpost of heaven on earth with authority over all temporal arrangements. However, even at the height of its power and influence the Church's authority did not go unchallenged by the state, even though it was the Church that usually won.

The development that finally helped to define the difference between the two spheres was the coinage of the word *secularism* in 1850 by G.J. Holyoake. He used the term to denote a system whereby the state itself would operate only on the basis of principles derived from the human world, while not seeking to interfere with the private practices of those who wished to run their lives on the basis of principles derived from sacred texts.

Holyoake may have coined the phrase, but the dynamic behind it had been building since the Enlightenment, that revolt of the 18th Century against the intolerance and divisiveness of religion. One of the most pronounced characteristics of religious systems is the way they violently disagree with each other. Since there is no verification system that allows us to decide incontrovertibly between competing supernatural claims, religions squabble constantly over interpretations of their own sacred texts. It was this endless conflict that revolted one of the great figures of the Enlightenment, Voltaire. He was an advocate of the necessity of tolerance in human affairs. His reasoning was interesting. In his *Philosophical Dictionary* he warned us that we are all formed of weakness and error, so we should reciprocally pardon each other's folly.

Shall a reed laid low in the mud by the wind say to a fellow reed fallen in the opposite direction: "Crawl as I crawl, wretch, or I shall petition that you be torn up by the roots and burned"?

It was clear to Voltaire and other thinkers of the Enlightenment that intolerance was intrinsic to religion's self-understanding. Believing, as they did, that they were in possession of an absolute truth communicated directly to them by God, how could religious adherents tolerate those who spurned it? That is why when religion has untrammelled sway in any society it is always

dangerously authoritarian. Emerging secular consciousness drew two important conclusions from the disruptive effects on human society of the intolerance of religion. The first was that the authority of religious leaders had to be confined to their own faith communities. This process of separation happened in different ways and at different speeds in Europe, and was never perfectly achieved anywhere, though it probably came closest in France where everything in the public realm was constitutionally established as fully secular.

But it was the second element in the secular strategy that had the greater impact. This was the outlawing of religious discrimination. Slowly, this enabled the emergence of religious plurality in European societies, with an inevitably eroding effect upon the authority and influence of any single religious tradition. This is why Voltaire said that if you have two religions in your land, they will cut each other's throats; but if you have thirty religions, they will dwell in peace. Our experience in Scotland could be seen as justifying Voltaire's point. While we still suffer from the ugly residue of sectarianism, especially in the west, the increasingly plural nature of Scottish society is slowly draining the poison from these old wounds.

It is worth noting, however, that while religions are adept at taking advantage of the tolerance that secular governments extend to them, they rarely return the compliment. They have been exempted from the requirements of European law on certain aspects of human rights, particularly relating to women and sexual minorities. Apart from being averse to the electoral danger of stirring up a quarrel with vocal and influential minorities, the thinking of government is that religions occupy a private sphere into which the law should not intrude. That would be fine if religious leaders confined the expression of their own intolerance to the community of their own adherents. Unfortunately, the role of religious groups in opposing gay marriage shows that their instinctive authoritarianism is still alive and kicking.

Let me now gather these strands together and offer a conclusion. We humans have organized ourselves in states or commonwealths in order to control our own unruly passions and bring some stability to our affairs; but the systems we created in the past reflected our vices as well as our virtues and entrenched social arrangements of distant times, many of them intensely cruel. Moral evolution is hard enough to achieve at any time, but religion adds to the difficulty by anointing these shifting social arrangements with the absolute authority of God. That is why in societies where religious institutions are powerful social change is strongly resisted. If you have been persuaded by your religion that humanity's social arrangements are not historically contingent but were pre-ordained by God to last for ever, then how on earth can you be persuaded to change your mind about them? Gay marriage – to take a current example – is not a matter of widening access to a human institution that has fluctuated in meaning and observance, it is to challenge an order eternally fixed by God.

That is why, as the pace of social change quickens in Scotland, we must reassert the founding principle of the secular state and claim it anew for our nation. In the name of that principle we will continue to extend toleration towards institutions that are themselves intolerant; but we will not permit them to export their institutional prejudices into the secular sphere. They may continue to discriminate against women and gays in the sanctuary; but we will not permit them to do so in the public square. But our adherence to the secular spirit must include a strong admixture of scepticism towards the secular state itself. Central to my thesis in this essay is that the human animal, this clever ape, is easily corrupted by power and inevitably misuses it. And secular powers are not exempt from this weakness, which is why we have to build round them a system of checks, balances and reversals. Tony Benn once said that whenever he meets someone with power over him he always asks, how can I get rid of you when the time comes?

There are two types of person who are fundamental to this process of constant challenge to the corruptions of institutional power, the victim and the dissident. It is victims who guarantee moral progress in society by organizing opposition to the powers that oppress them, and their allies are outsiders who are constitutionally incapable of buying permanently into any system. Combined, these two groups act as creative destabilisers of institutional power in all its forms. Marx said this was done not by the weakening of the strong but by the strengthening of the weak. Thus was slavery abolished and women were emancipated and gay people were liberated. I hope that in the new nation that is emerging in Scotland that spirit of creative dissidence will not be lost.

I began this essay by agreeing with the opening words of J.M. Coetzee's novel *Diary of a Bad Year*. I want to end by disagreeing with his closing words, when he writes.

If I were to give my brand of political thought a label, I would call it pessimistic anarchistic quietism, or anarchistic quietistic pessimism, or pessimistic quietistic anarchism: anarchism because experience tells me that what is wrong with politics is power itself; quietism because I have my doubts about the will to set about changing the world, a will infected with the drive to power; and pessimism because I am sceptical that, in a fundamental way, things can be changed.

I would change one word in Coetzee's self-description and commend a political stance called pessimistic anarchistic *activism*. Pessimistic, because it is obvious that the human ape is a cruel and tricky customer we should never trust with too much power; anarchistic because it is obvious to me that power invariably corrupts those who hold it and the institutions they create to wield it; but *activism* not quietism because I believe the world can be changed. If change were not possible, we would still have slavery and the oppression of women and gay men committing suicide. We ended those abuses in spite of the opposition of religious institutions, so we should continue to watch them with a wary eye. But here's an interesting paradox: one of the most influential pessimistic anarchistic activists of all time was a 1st Century Galilean peasant called – Jesus.

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About the Saltire Society

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- An apolitical membership organisation open to all
- An international supporter and patron of the arts and cultural heritage of Scotland
- A champion of free speech on the issues that matter to the cultural life of every Scot
- A promoter of the best of what we are culturally, now and in the future
- A catalyst to ensure new ideas are considered and the best of them are made real

We believe we have an important and unique role to play, as an independent advocate and celebrant of all that is good and important about our cultural lives and achievements. The Society has played a crucial role over the last seventy five years, in recognising our cultural achievements. And while times have changed the need for that independent voice remains.

About Richard Holloway

Richard Holloway is a writer and broadcaster. He is the author of more than twenty books, including *Godless Morality, Doubts & Loves, Looking in the Distance* and *Between the Monster and the Saint: Reflections on the Human Condition*. His latest book, *Leaving Alexandria: A Memoir of Faith and Doubt*, was published by Canongate in March 2012.. He was Bishop of Edinburgh and Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church till he stood down in 2000. He was Gresham Professor of Divinity in the City of London 1997-2001. He was a member of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority from its inception in 1990 till 1997, and chaired its ethics committee. He was on the BMA's steering group on Ethics and Genetics 1995-19998. He was a member of the Broadcasting Standards Commission from 2000-2003. He was Chairman of the Scottish Arts Council 2005-2010. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, and received its Gold Medal in 2008. He is the Chairman of Sistema Scotland, the charity that has brought the Venezuelan youth orchestra system to Scotland. A frequent broadcaster, he has presented a number of television series, including *Holloway's Road, The Sword and the Cross* and *Art and Soul*. He regularly presents *Sunday Morning with Richard Holloway* for BBC Radio Scotland.

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