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FOREWORD

Although the phrase “crisis of authority” has developed almost the status of cliché, the phenomenon to which it refers is nonetheless very real. We are clearly living in a time when the foundational values of Western civilization have eroded to a dangerous degree. This development, auguring the descent of a new Dark Age, presents the church with both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge is that Christians no longer may merely assume that the momentum of Western Christendom will continue to provide an environment favorable to Christian faith and life. The church is challenged to re-examine and perhaps totally to rebuild a foundation capable of supporting free and faithful lives.

Yet, the erosion of traditional values also offers the church an opportunity to commend Christian faith to those who, in Isaiah’s words, “grope for the wall like the blind.” In unparalleled fashion, the present situation calls for the church to demonstrate the relevance of Christian faith. These essays are presented toward the end of encouraging Christian reflection regarding the many issues associated with the loss of authority in the wider society and in the church.

Michael R. Weed, Editor

THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS, OR THE JESUS OF AUTHORITY?

By Michael R. Weed

Even under the best of circumstances authority is a notoriously difficult issue to discuss. But in a time when the prevailing climate of opinion finds the very concept of authority suspect--raising images of external impositions, arbitrariness, and "authoritarianism"--the difficulties are compounded. Yet it is precisely for these and related reasons that it is important for Christians to reflect on the nature of authority--particularly on the nature of authority in Christian faith and life.

We all find ourselves living under and responding to a variety of different authorities. Even those who purport to "do their own thing" simply set themselves up as their own authority--they do not live without authority. At any rate, the authorities before which we find ourselves are variously and complexly interrelated. Any serious discussion of authority must to some extent take account of this fact and attempt to cast light on the whole structure of authority--both descriptively and normatively. What, for example, are the different authorities acknowledged? What are the different kinds of authority? How are they interrelated? Where is Christian authority in all this? Where should it be?

Discussions regarding religious authority and particularly biblical authority tend to suffer from the fact that they too often occur among those who share the same basic assumptions and differ only in minor details. Consequently, conversations seldom examine the foundational issues regarding the nature and function of authority. Further, they generally do not take account of the different ways that authority is seen within the Bible itself. Thus such discussions and their assertions that the bible is authoritative seldom wrestle with how it is authoritative, much less examine whether there are different kinds and levels of biblical authority. Nor do they address the question as to how biblical authority relates to other authorities.

In order at least to attempt to step outside the limitations of much intramural argument regarding authority, I want to begin these comments rather far afield from biblical texts or explicit theological considerations regarding more narrowly defined concerns with authority in Christian faith. Subsequent to this, I will attempt to relate my initial comments to religious authority. Finally, I will draw some tentative conclusions which appear to deserve further consideration.

Authority

When we turn to reflect on authority in general, most of us will agree with Hannah Arendt that “we find ourselves in a constant, ever-widening and deepening crisis of authority.”¹ This crisis has spread from the realm of the polis into traditionally pre-political areas such as the family, child-rearing, and education. Here authority has always

been accepted as a necessity--both from the point of view of the child, whose needs and helplessness seem to demand it, and from that of society, with its need for order and continuity between generations. We might add that the crisis has also spread to or is reflected in voluntary associations--whose continued existence is always fragile at best--and especially has it spread to religious communities.

Arendt observes that before we can speak of anything so ambitious as recovering or regaining authority, we must first understand the nature of authority. More precisely, we must see what it was and-by implication--what it never was. Failure to do this work carefully will not serve us well when, in desperation, we turn to inadequate views of authority.

In defining authority, Arendt states that the “hallmark of authority is unquestioning recognition by those who are asked to obey.”² Further, because authority is always associated with demands for obedience, it is understandable that it is commonly mistaken for some form of power or coercion. Consequently, she argues, considerable confusion has arisen regarding such terms as power, strength, force, authority, and violence. This confusion is symptomatic of careless speech, to be sure; but beyond this it belies a fundamental conviction that the most crucial question is simply who, in the final analysis, really rules whom? In this manner, authority comes to be defined by phrases such as “command sanctioned by force.”

According to Arendt, this definition is wholly inadequate and indicative of the contemporary problem with authority. She argues that, by contrast, authority actually

precludes the use of external means of coercion, stating that “where force is used, authority itself has failed.”³ By way of illustration she notes how parents actually undermine their authority by treating children in a brutal or tyrannical fashion.

Further, however, she argues that authority is also eroded or destroyed by persuasion.⁴ Persuasion, working through a process of argumentation, presupposes some form of equality. Thus Arendt concludes that the foundation on which true authority rests is neither the power of those in command nor is it common sense. Rather, she insists, authority rests on the hierarchy in which the office, institution, and person are acknowledged as authoritative.

Authority, in the first instance, resides in human relationships--whether formal or informal, the latter including institutions--that are regarded as legitimate by the communities to which we belong. Each of us is a member of several communities, and within the context of these we variously acknowledge the legitimacy of different “authorities. “ It is to these acknowledged authorities--authoritative institutions and their representatives--that we often appeal when our actions or their propriety is questioned.

For example, one may be asked, “By what authority are you doing that?” And one may reply, “I work here.” or, “It’s OK; I’m a doctor.” Or, “I’m her father,” or even, “the Bible says . . .” In each such instance, the answer legitimates the action by virtue of appealing to some commonly recognized institution, office, social role, or relationship--some accepted authority.

Further, these various authorities and the communities in which they emerge and

function are usually arranged loosely and knit together by more general loyalties and values. These broader allegiances underlie and support the many lesser communities of which we are a part. Obviously, to the degree that our commitments compete or are even contradictory, we will be divided both among and within ourselves.

Although divided loyalties and competing authorities can exist almost anywhere to some degree, they exist in profusion in modern pluralistic societies. In pluralistic societies there is a radical shift from cultural homogeneity to cultural heterogeneity. With the dissolution of the underlying vision of reality that provides cohesion and direction, many competing centers of value emerge. Individuals ally themselves with various communities based primarily on narrowly defined self-interest. A society thus becomes a Hobbesian nightmare, an unstable amalgam of various groups vying for power and “rights” with little or no sense of overall purpose or direction.

In this climate the most widely acknowledged authority becomes that of civil law.⁵ But the law itself undergoes a radical change. The purpose of the law becomes less and less that of enhancing the common good and securing those underlying values which unify and direct society. Harvard Professor of Law Harold Berman writes”

Law is now generally considered--at least in public discourse--to be simply a pragmatic device for accomplishing specific political, economic, and social objectives. Its tasks are thought to be finite, material, impersonal--to get things done, to make people act in certain ways. Rarely, if ever, does one hear it said that law is reflective of an objective justice or of the ultimate meaning or purpose of life.⁶

Accordingly, society becomes increasingly marked by litigation as law, devoid of any

overarching vision of reality, becomes the basis of all our relationships. These, in turn, are reduced to the form of legal contract.

Further, as law comes to be measured solely by pragmatic standards rather than those of truth or rightness, it evokes little respect from those whose self-interests it does not directly serve. Consequently, the authority of the law increasingly appears to rest in the threat of coercive sanctions--in short, force. We do well at this point to remember Hannah Arendt's caution against equating force and authority. Obviously different authorities are invested with amounts of power to execute their designated responsibilities. But it is inaccurate and misleading to assume that force is the foundation of authority. Certainly it is because of the legitimacy and nature of the police officer's authority that he wears a weapon--but the weapon itself is not the basis of his authority.

Returning to the phenomenon of the law, we may note that law is, in the first instance, a social fact. Laws emerge within human communities. They are created and obeyed within human communities. Laws give explicit and public recognition to the claims and expectations to which social relationships give rise. It may be argued that authority seems to be a social fact as much as--if not actually before--it is a legal fact. In this regard, political authority, and its dependence upon forms of assent, may be more reflective of the nature and function of authority within human communities than is civil law in its present role.

Yet behind our many changing laws lies the Law. And although we cannot deny that laws are created in communities, the Law resists being reduced to consensus or

caprice. If the Law merely reflects the State's will, or the will of the court--however good either may be--the Law is ultimately capricious. But could it be that the Law reflects, however dimly, something "other than itself"? Does its authority have roots in moral sentiments and notions that are related to some greater structure of accountability and a more encompassing world of meaning? It is this issue that the present crisis of authority inescapably raises.⁷

Nearly 2,400 years ago Plato, writing The Republic during the decline of the Greek polis, was looking for a basis of authority in which the compelling element lay in the relationship and actually existed prior to the issuance of commands. Truth itself--discovered by the philosopher, in Plato's view, in the bright sky outside the shadow world of the cave in which humankind resides--provides the compelling ingredient of which this authority is composed.⁸

Whatever difficulties are associated with Plato's views, he correctly grasped two things regarding authority. First, he saw that authority must ultimately be linked to something "outside the cave"; i.e., it must be ultimately based on or related to some transcendent reality. Second, the nature of such authority must be, in large part, self-validating, or able to evoke trust and compliance for its own sake.

Authority in Theological Perspective

Clearly these concerns (shared, I might add by a number of contemporary jurists) bring us to the theological dimension--whatever language is used to express it. It is the

Christian confession that there is a depth-dimension or transcendent reality from which human existence derives its ultimate meaning and purpose. Further, it is the Christian experience not that the philosopher has climbed out of the cave and discovered the light of truth. Rather, the light of truth has entered into the world of shadows and darkness and has disclosed ultimate reality to be personal and purposive.

The Gospels tell us that, unlike the scribes and rabbis of his day, Jesus spoke as one having authority (Mark 1:22). He did not cite various justificatory authorities to corroborate his words. (And one assumes that his authority did not reside in his air of self-confidence, his impressive elocution, or his persuasive manner.) Jesus' words simply carried the weight of truth--they rang true.

Let me suggest that the authority of Jesus is a wholly different kind of authority than "justificatory" authority. Jesus' words carry the authority of reality breaking in on our fantasies and illusions--an authority like that which the world we awaken to each morning exercises as the morning sunlight dispels the dreams and illusions of the night.

Jesus' words illuminate the mind, evoke trust, and impel actions. His authority is not one that limits or constrains human freedom; precisely the opposite is the case. Jesus enables a panoramic and richly nuanced vision of reality--one in which we experience the very ground of existence to be both personal and faithful to the creation. Jesus' authority is that of one who both founds and confers freedom. He frees us from the limitations and illusions of our diminished realities and from the tyranny of those countless pseudo-

authorities which confer neither freedom nor life.

At this point it is extremely important to note that Jesus does not just disclose a strange other world; he occasions a perceptual revolution in our everyday world. That is to say, he does not merely supplement but otherwise leave intact this world. This would lead to some form of gnosis or truth held--however sincerely--but unrelated to the everyday or life-world. We do not become visionaries moving in the mist at the edge of mundane reality. Rather, Jesus occasions a “permanent revolution” in which all that is familiar in our world is being viewed from a new angle of vision,

Further, I think we can detect at least two stages or dimensions of the perceptual revolution to which Jesus gives rise. In the first place, Jesus de-centers our life-worlds and exposes both their selfishness and idolatry. He exposes the false absolutes and pseudo-authorities which guide our commitments and values from one day to the next. And this is not a once-and-for-all accomplishment but an on-going process. The State, for example, is not the source of the law--it possesses only limited and derivative authority. Christ, not Caesar--not the flag nor the marketplace--is Lord. Thus the authority of Jesus is one with a dismantling or even a destructive dimension in that it relativizes all other authorities, claims, and allegiances.

But the impact of Jesus goes beyond relativizing other authorities; it also reorders or rearranges our allegiances and commitments. False absolutes are not just destroyed but may also be subordinated and recommissioned as our life-worlds are realigned. The State, while not the source of the law, is the servant of the law and is ordained by God to a

legitimate if limited role of maintaining order and promoting justice.

In short, the authority of Jesus is not unlike the authority of light shining into darkness, illuminating familiar terrain in a new way and enabling one to walk with new confidence and direction. It occasions a new way of being in the world by providing one with a new vision of the world and of the frontier with transcendence from which it receives its ultimate shape and purpose.

Concluding Observations

Finally, on the basis of the foregoing, I want to make three observations regarding authority in Christian faith and life. First, the authority of Jesus (and I would suggest the Bible as well) does not appear to be, at least in the first instance, due wholly to its appeal to our canons of logic.⁹ In fact, if this were the case, revelation would become subservient to criteria for truth which we already possess. Rather, faith precedes understanding; one believes in order to understand. I suspect that no amount of argumentation will induce one to accept the authority of Jesus (or the Bible) if his life and words do not commend themselves and evoke acknowledgment and allegiance. Or, in the language of John's gospel, it is to those who come that it is given to see! Faith is given to disciples, not to spectators or disputants.

Consequently, I think we would understand much more about the authority of the Bible if we paid more attention to its function in ordering the moral life--forming character and guiding conduct--rather than attempting to derive abstract and intellectual

theological systems from it.

Second, it seems to me not only possible but probable that the church may lose authority as it gains influence and power. The latter invariably tend to reflect Christians forming various misalliances which entail allegiances to authorities who are ultimately pseudo-authorities. Further, they bespeak a misunderstanding of the nature and source of ultimate authority, viz., the assumption that real authority resides in the hands of the prestigious and the powerful .

Finally, I would argue that the Christian message is not a word which is authoritative only within the Christian community. It is the word of the Creator, and the degree to which it is felt to be alien is indicative of the degree that humankind lives “east of Eden.” Nonetheless, it has shown itself powerful and capable of “breaking through” in history and is, as Paul states, the word of God and not the word of men (1 Thess. 2:13).

To the extent that there is a “crisis of authority” in the church and in the lives of Christians today, I suggest that this is not simply because the Christian faith has become impalatable. Rather, attempts to minimize the strangeness of God’s claim and to augment and buttress its authority with other “authorities” betray entanglements with idolatrous allegiances to lesser authorities. Our challenge is to rediscover and open ourselves to the true authority of Jesus.

Footnotes

- ¹ Hannah Arendt, "What Is Authority?" Between Past and Future (New York: The Viking Press, 1961), p. 91.
- ² Hannah Arendt, On Violence (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1969), p. 45.
- ³ Arendt, "What is Authority?", op. cit., p. 93.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ See James Gustafson, "Authority in a Pluralistic Society," The Church as Moral Decision Maker (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1970), p.51.
- ⁶ Harold J. Berman, "Law, Religion, and the Present Danger," Worldview, Vol. 22, Number 9 (September, 1979), p. 48.
- ⁷ Not surprisingly, one finds interest in natural law foundations of civil law in Japan and West Germany, both nations with costly experience with the positivistic view of law. In this country Harold J. Berman (see note 6 above) is a leader among those contending for a vital interrelationship between law and religion.
- ⁸ Plato, The Republic (New York: Vintage Books), pp. 253 ff.
- ⁹ I am arguing not that revelation is contrary to reason, much less that there is no absolute truth. I am only suggesting that the individual's reason is not as rational as we assume and that each of us has a limited view of the Absolute. Cf. Nicholas Wolterstorff, Reason Within the Bounds of Religion (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976).

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