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Some observations on  
Authority, its nature, exercise and implications

by

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The subject prescribed to me is enormously wide. I shall try first to discuss the subject in general terms and to proceed later to consider the special problems of authority in a more theological context.

1. The concept of authority is in no way specially religious or theological, though there may be much psychological association. In 'secular' western society the present 'crisis of authority' may indeed be intricately connected with current confusion about religion and ethics. But the connexion is more obviously psychological than logical. Society as a whole has rights over, and makes claims upon, individual members of the group, and can express its authority through particular officials, appointed or elected by recognized procedures, who rest on social custom and law as the basis for expecting obedience to their imperatives. Because, in some, aggression, violence, and dissidence do harm to others, society imposes its will by sanctions of pain or loss. Before its superior physical force, the individual prudently bows. In practice, because of human cupidity and aggressiveness, authority cannot function without sanctions. But the brute force of coercion is not the real ground on which authority rests. Authority in civil government cannot long survive if force is its sole and exclusive instrument. It must also enjoy at least some degree of loyalty from its citizens. This loyalty may have many levels and motives. Some assent because submission, though reluctantly given, can be seen to be advantageous in the long term. Others assent merely because they do not like to be out of step with everyone else, or because they have given no thought to the matter. At a high level authority binds the very conscience itself, as force never can.

Conscience is an obscure word for an obscure thing. It is on the one hand a private and individual matter of moral choice -- a name for that citadel of the personality which makes men responsible individuals rather than so much vegetable growth on a malodorous compost heap. On the other hand it is formed and shaped by the community, by the family, by early upbringing, and to be conscientious is to be a person with a strong sense of obligation to the community's interests.

Authority is invested with the capacity to command the loyalty and respect of members of society to such a degree that they will feel obliged, or at least

willing, to prefer the will and interest of the community before their own inclination and convenience. Unless a large majority of citizens in a state either wish to obey the law (because they think its provisions good and just) or are at least willing to acquiesce in its commands (whether because they have a habit of acquiescence, or because they think it expedient to observe rules, even if quite unconvinced of their goodness and justice), the sanctions of the law can only be imposed with difficulty, and authority is not held in respect. This will of the majority to keep respect for law and government constitutes the authority.

Where authority binds the conscience, it is concerned with the survival of the community as an ordered society. The absolute sense of duty arises at all points where survival is the issue. I have an obligation of loyalty and love to my wife and children. No doubt a promise is a promise, and the pure fact that I made a promise is one good reason for keeping it. But it is also true that the survival of the family as a unit depends upon my observation of my promise. Again, I have a duty to pay taxes, to help in the self-defence of the community against external attack or internal disruption.

In all such cases my moral duty is a response to the authority of the community; I obey not merely because there are unpleasant means of coercion to force me, but because my conscience is touched. In most cases I obey society's imperatives with little hesitation or even reflection. It does not need long thought or experience to see that traffic regulations reduce the killing on the highway. Self interest and consideration for others combine to help me to observe them, and to recognize the rationality of authority's decrees. Authority does not reside in the mere imperative taken by itself. It is something underlying the verbal form as its ground and justification and is the cause of obedience. Frequently the person who pronounces the imperative is not especially impressive. His tone of voice and style may be wholly undistinguished. The local tax inspector may or may not be a knight of faith (to adapt Kierkegaard's famous dictum): we do not inquire when we receive his demands. He represents society and government; and naturally he is upheld by sanctions, since we seldom enjoy parting with money to the government and are often very doubtful if it will be wisely spent. Yet he is distinct from a gunman demanding money with menaces. It is understood that authority has reasonable claims on the contributions of society's members.

Acute problems arise when authority prescribes action which my conscience judges to be wrong. But even there, it is unhappily difficult to be sure that a moral issue is in fact a moral issue rather than an issue determined by non-moral factors which is clothing itself in moral terms because it is in search of higher ground to stand on.

What if authority forbids actions which my conscience judges to be innocuous or even desirable, or which I regard as lying in my own responsible decision and therefore no matter for universal edict? Authority has some duty to preserve order and prevent violence. May I use violence to stop a football match, on the ground that one team in that football match is selected on principles of racial prejudice?

Were those heroic figures who plotted Hitler's murder in 1944 justified in resorting to tyrannicide? At what point is violence justified?

The Soviet immigration authorities will not allow me to import Bibles into their country. Provided that I make no false statement to the Customs authorities, my conscience would judge it highly desirable and certainly innocuous to disregard this remarkable prohibition of the Bible (as anti-Soviet literature).

There are many situations where conscience and civil authority differ. If a very large proportion of consciences in a community dissent from authority, the standing of authority is weakened, with consequences which are divisive for the society in many other respects as well.

Loss of respect for authority is very possible, the moment it ceases to be seen as a service to society and where its coercion, reinforced by intimidation, is resented by good men. Authority is not a wholly beneficent facet of social organisation. Because some people will harm others unless forcibly restrained, civil authority must have coercive powers. It inheres in the nature of the case that power cannot be equally distributed among all citizens, and therefore must be concentrated in the hands of a few, who (since men desire power) will possess privilege and even prestige above their fellows. They will therefore be objects of envy and malice, however righteous and conscientious they may be. On the other hand, there is the too familiar fact that power corrupts. Acton's well known dictum is probably too cynical in making it a universal rule, as if the possessor of power were ipso facto a corrupt person. Nevertheless, experience teaches that he is vulnerable to strong temptations, to feather his own nest and above all to use the apparatus of centralised government to oppress those whose support is unnecessary to his regime.

Therefore the function of law is not merely to bind the citizen, but also to protect him against oppression by governments with the machinery of coercion. Hence the principle that law shall be of universal application to all citizens in any given category. When the British government passes an Act of retrospective legislation affecting a particular individual, it has disregarded this principle. Likewise, if members of the central committee of the Communist party and the government enjoy the dangerous privilege of ignoring speed limits in built up areas of towns. We expect the law to be no respecter of persons, unless there is some quite special criterion by which, in the public interest, a particular person or category of persons requires to be treated as exceptional.

The problem of civil authority has become even more complex and difficult as a result of the world's present passionate concern for equality. Equality is an obscure notion, and as an ideal includes things that are obviously mutually incompatible. We want all men to be treated with equal respect, and all men to be able to live at a sufficient level of material well being so that they are not excluded from sharing in the normal life of their community. Yet a strict equality of wealth in a community (like equality of opportunity) can only be achieved by erecting overwhelming coercive power at the centre of government; equal wealth requires unequal power as a condition of its achievement.

Some of the restlessness and hostility to authority in the contemporary world evidently springs from egalitarian passion. The mutual incompatibility of the kinds of equality which men seek seems to ensure dangerous disenchantment consequent on the discovery that strict equality in one major field can only be achieved by increasing inequality in another. The egalitarian passion leads contemporary men to desire social change - any kind of change - partly from a sense that the time remaining to us may be short, partly from a vehement rejection of the past. It is characteristic of our Western world that the two dominant types of philosophy - existentialism and linguistic philosophy - are profoundly anti-historical. Authority is constitutionally cautious about change, and likes to have a monopoly of innovation. The passions for equality and for change are reinforced by a dislike of mystery, majesty, the aura of distance with which authority clothes itself. Contemporary man likes to strip away the last vestige of figleaf from anything that tradition likes to enfold in mystery.

2. Where civil government is not immediately concerned, authority will not demand obedience, but will simply expect to be treated with respect and attention, to have its view weighed and, if not followed, discarded for sufficient reason. In this sense a legal authority, a luminary of the Supreme Court or the House of Lords, may express a view. Counsel's opinion has some influence. The advice of a trusted friend is the advice of authority. At a Quaker meeting a majority will not feel free to impose its will if it is opposed by a single weighty friend of years and discretion (and indeed will normally go to great lengths and expenditure of time to try and reach a unanimous consensus). In such cases the authority has no sanction other than his disapprobation. Moreover it is personal. The view carries weight because the holder is an accepted expert or has some special personal magnetism or charisma.

It is possible that he may also hold an office of eminence so that some attention is commanded by the mere fact that a distinguished office-bearer holds it. High position in the social or bureaucratic, or governmental, or academic, or commercial hierarchy gives reinforcement and support to the more important personal authority. The external fact of office (or any outward insignia by which this

is expressed) does not, however, constitute the source of authority. A fool or a knave in judge's robe, a bishop's mitre, professor's chair, or high government office, does little except to embarrass everyone concerned and to diminish society's respect for the office in general. On the other hand, a wise, prudent and well informed man will enjoy a greater degree of attention in consequence of holding some office normally held in respect in society. In short, his office does nothing whatever to improve his intelligence or understanding, but it may strengthen and enhance the respect and expectation with which his opinions are received. Delicate problems arise here in relation to the social prestige and insignia of the Christian clergy. Worldly signs of social status may possess some modest utility if they serve to express a recognition that even in the 'natural' community of ordinary life the clergy have a place in the social 'hierarchy' which every human group inevitably and instinctively forms. Today we think of such things as triumphalist and even obstructive. Certainly no purpose is served by preserving into the 20th century insignia which had significance in the 4th but are now only picturesque. It is easy for the clergy to be pigeon-holed as having a certain role to play and special clothes to wear, like those of a circus clown, which tell everyone what kind of speech is expected. Nevertheless, good may be done if clergy are accepted in places of influence in ordinary society. In the West they retain a certain presence, which at present seems to be slightly diminishing, in the academic world which they once dominated. But outside the realm of education instances are hard to find.

If a man holds an office which calls him to give expression to deep aspirations of the community, such as Prime Minister or President of a Nation-State, or leader of a struggling group such as blacks in Western society, the fervent wishes of the group act upon him so that he is caught up to a higher level, at least in the minds of his audience who see and hear him as larger than life, and probably in his own mind as well. For he is no longer a private individual. He is expressing the deepest longings and ideals of an entire community. If, however, he represents a group which, within a larger community, feels excluded from the traditional positions of status, his role is likely to take on the shape of a radical prophet, critical of custom and the old hierarchies whose families have a natural interest in preserving a like authority, if not for their own flesh and blood, at least for their own class and social type.

The charismatic figure, however, like the expert, is frequently expected (and even more frequently expects) to receive some recognition within the traditional or bureaucratic structure. The outsider who gets to the top of the greasy pole is accorded status as if he had been an insider. A special example is provided by the academic world. High capacity for original and creative research is a kind of charisma - a divine fire, like that of an artist or composer. In the realm

of academic research no one has any authority derived from his position in the academic hierarchy. It is true that important discoveries may bring the finder twenty honorary degrees. But among students of the subject his real authority resides not in transitory glories, nor in any honorific titles, but simply on the quality of his work in teaching and research. In short, his authority stands ex sese, non ex consensu; that is, he has this charisma because he has it, not because other people think he has. Nevertheless, at least in Western Europe (less perhaps in the U.S.A.), society harnesses and domesticates the original and creative mind, often integrating him into the more controllable structures of functional or bureaucratic authority. A great researcher in his thirties becomes head of an institution in his fifties, by which time, if he is a Natural Scientist, his creative fire may have waned a little anyway. A disadvantage of appointing a distinguished composer to a modern university professorship of music is that you may crush the composer in him.

Max Weber's well known analysis distinguished the three types of authority:

- (1) the patriarchal or traditional, where long custom in the community determines status and position in the pecking order;
- (2) the bureaucratic or functional, dependent on roles which the individual members of society recognize to be necessary for their economic and social well-being;
- (3) the charismatic leader - the founder of a religion, the initiator of a national revival, a gifted artist, teacher, or trainer. He may be good; but he may also be evil!<sup>1</sup> a malignantly powerful figure with hypnotic powers over those who follow him - a Hitler - more contemporary instances may come to mind. The beneficent type of charismatic authority is a source of strength and inspiration to those whom he guides, enabling them to achieve greater things than could have been done without him. The malignant type dominates and exploits his subjects.

In the first and third cases the recognition of authority is immediate and self-evident. In the case of functional authority the calculations of self-interest do not normally take long: as we have seen, there may be trouble if a substantial number of people fail or refuse to recognize the benefits of a reasonably ordered society, organized so as to produce far greater wealth than separate individuals could possibly amass without a rational bureaucratic system. Authority, when it expresses the mind of a group, is not kind to dissidents.

In the contemporary western world, while the second type is now universal, the first and third are the most interesting (and no doubt the rarest). Moreover there has always been potentially explosive tension between tradition and charisma - a tension on which J.M. Barrie constructed his well known play The Admirable Crichton, where a highly aristocratic English family, shipwrecked on a desert island, finds that, reduced to the state of uncultured nature, they instinctively look to their butler as the born charismatic leader of their society,

<sup>1</sup>Weber did not notice this distinction.

so that the high-born ladies now compete for the favour of his attention. Finally, as they are rescued by a passing liner, the old roles reassert themselves and the butler, on the island a king, once more becomes a self-effacing, obsequious servant.

3. The traditional, the expert, and the charismatic (but hardly the bureaucratic and functional) types of authority appear when we inquire into the specific intellectual problem of the role of authority in relation to belief. I believe that William the Conqueror invaded England in A.D. 1066. Not being a mediaevalist, I accept this story on secondary authority. That is to say, I have not actually consulted the earliest records concerning the Norman Conquest, which have the status of primary authorities in the matter. I believe it because friends both learned and honest assure me it is so. Here the secondary authorities, the experts, are quite unable to verify the proposition themselves without recourse to the primary authorities, the contemporary or near contemporary witnesses. But the learned and honest mediaevalists play an important role for me: they transmit the story to me, and moreover can give me reasons if asked. They can put the evidence before me and challenge me to reach a different conclusion.

It is true that in history the relation between evidence and authority is more complex than in the physical sciences. In the physical sciences the evidence can be produced and reproduced here and now. In history the past cannot be investigated in this way. The facts themselves are seldom absolutely certain. Even where they are not as such in dispute, they will look very different according to the various patterns of interpretation in which they are seen. And it is only through such patterns of interpretation that the facts become accessible to us anyway. Facts do not come to us in isolation. We only succeed in making sense of them by placing them in a context, by seeing them from a certain standpoint. The history historians write depends directly on their attitude to the world and their estimate of human nature and destiny. The same is no doubt true in some degree of all the natural Sciences that touch directly on the behaviour of man and are therefore morally involved.

This pattern of interpretation, or context, or standpoint, will be coherent with the facts and illuminate them so as to make them visible to us; but a total view of the world, and of human nature and destiny, is more an act of faith than a deduction from a large number of observed phenomena. If so, the antithesis of belief on the evidence of facts and belief on authority is misleading. A total view of the world is socially transmitted and is received as part of a consensus among educated persons: any view which is received in such a way is being accepted 'on authority'. Whenever rationalists tell us that this or that opinion is accepted by all modern humanists, they are appealing to the authority of a social consensus. The characteristic of a consensus is to regard its beliefs as self evident. If this is combined with confidence that its beliefs are grounded on reason, the consensus quickly becomes a suffocating authoritarianism which regards all intelligent dissent as the consequence of moral turpitude.

4. When we turn to consider the function and media of authority within the history of the Christian community, we find in modified dress all the same problems as beset ordinary society. During the first four centuries alone, the ancient church faced the familiar questions: What discipline should be applied to delinquents? In whom does the power of the keys lie? (In the whole community? in its bishop? or in a 'bishop of bishops', such as a metropolitan, or the bishop of some great see? or in charismatic figures such as prophets, Montanists, martyrs or monks?) Is prophecy more supernatural than the normal sacramental life of the church? What is the relation of scripture to tradition (e.g. in catechism and liturgy)? Are there limits to the biblical 'canon'? Granted that councils of bishops are the best way of deciding this, (together with the date of Easter and penitential rules), is there appeal, in disciplinary or doctrinal cases, to a larger council? When is a council's decision final? Was Chalcedon authoritative ex sese? or ex consensu ecclesiae (Romanae)? In what way does subsequent reception contribute to the authority of e.g. the Nicene creed? Is the authority of pope or patriarch in relation to bishops of lesser sees fraternal or paternal?

But it is not necessary, in this paper, to give a necessarily long historical review of the debate about authority in Christendom. For the purpose of this conference I venture to think it will be of more service to offer brief reflections on two questions: (i) what today are the fundamental differences on authority which Roman Catholics and Anglicans have inherited from past history, and which still have influence over the conversation between them?

(ii) what prospects are there for a restatement of religious authority in the modern western world?

- (i) Whatever individual Roman Catholics and Anglicans may have thought or now think, the two communities are not divided on the principle of authority. Both believe that faith is submission to God and is a gift of divine grace; that the church has an indispensable role in transmitting and teaching the Word of God and has authority in controversies of faith; that scripture, while always the prime criterion and vehicle of the Word of God, needs the living voice of the church to convey the message to contemporary man; that God has appointed orders of ministry for the church; that the priest is entrusted with the power of the keys as well as authority to celebrate the eucharist; that the preaching of the Word and the ministry of the sacraments are a supernatural and charismatic function; and so on.

Differences of emphasis, however, can become important. The controversies of the 16th century have left a scar on both sides in the debate. Until very recently, Roman Catholics have tended to speak less critically of the empirical church. To Anglicans, the obedience of faith obviously includes deep loyalty to the community: it is hard to draw a dividing line between 'Credo' and 'Sit anima mea cum eis'. But Anglicans may have become more accustomed to combining grateful



recognition of authority with the liberty of stern criticism, and are visibly afraid that human weakness and error may be protected by the cloak of divine authority. A fully sheep-like submissiveness to ecclesiastical shepherds would only be entirely fitting if our shepherds transcended the frailties of human nature.

In parallel with this runs a theological difference towards the preservation of the church from error. Since Jewel and Laud, Anglicans have been reserved towards assertions of the 'infallibility' of the church, and have much preferred to speak of its indefectibility. Certainly, the gates of hell shall not prevail against it; truth will not be abolished from the earth. The Holy Spirit continues a ceaseless work of rectification and reform. But the empirical church is most likely to heed this guiding hand if its pastors are well aware of their own imperfection and blindness. Laud and Bramhall criticise the Council of Trent from this point of view. Trent's decrees on justification and on sacramental theology were congenial enough to them. Their criticisms revolve round the attitude to authority: Trent was over-anxious to define where legitimate alternatives should be left open, and this over-anxiety is the result of a desire to vindicate, against Protestant appeals to sola scriptura, the living voice of the church as judge in controversy.

Laud and Bramhall regard Papal infallibility as a consequence of over-stating the case in a controversial setting — vulnerable because it may buy subjective certainty at the expense of truth; dangerous because belief in a single infallible teacher will lead to the production of definitions, not because the church needs them, but because silent oracles are not respected and definitions must therefore be made simply to maintain the claims of the defining authority.

Underlying this criticism there lies a subtle difference in attitudes towards liberty of opinion (including not only freedom to think, but freedom to propagate one's thoughts). In general, the Anglican tradition has been both cheerfully optimistic about the irresistible gravitational pull of truth (talking as if mistaken opinions would never long survive examination by reasonable men), and, simultaneously, gravely pessimistic about the capacity of the human mind, even with the help of grace, to compass divine truth (talking as if some degree of inadequacy can never be wholly eliminated from any proposition or doctrinal definition).

According to Jeremy Taylor (The Liberty of Prophesying, 1646), intellectual freedom is to be encouraged even at the price of allowing error in the church's accredited teachers, provided that they are honest and reverent. Truth is found by the approximations of serious, prayerful minds converging on a target which none may hit at the centre. In consequence, Anglican authority is far more 'slow-moving' than the Roman Catholic. We expect bishops to guard the gospel from heresy, superstition, and plain folly, but not to intervene early in a serious

theological discussion. There are obvious risks. The threat of relativism passing into scepticism (religious opinions valid only for the holder) is continually on the horizon of liberal Anglican theology, whose patron saint often appears as Doubting Thomas. (In passing, it is worth noting that the more sceptical one is of the validity of opinion, the less compunction one feels about suppression; relativism produces toleration among Erasmus-like intellectuals, seldom in the practical world of affairs.)

For Roman Catholics, I take it, the duty of preserving the church from error is entrusted in a special sense to the see of Rome, and this preservative function in doctrine and faith is indissolubly associated with the position of Rome as the symbol and instrument of unity and order in the Catholic Church. Truth and unity both depend on Roman authority for their conservation, and are inter-dependent: if all agree in the truth, unity will follow naturally and easily (if not automatically), while if all are kept in one communion and fellowship, this monolithic unity is in itself a sign of truth. Faith and order coinhere at the deepest level. From such a point of view, any Anglican talk about 'convergence' and 'approximations' will look both vague and humanistic, and will suggest that faith is mere human aspiration rather than a divinely granted submission to revealed truth. On the other hand, if authority produces unity by suppressing liberty and by removing controversial topics from the realm of discussion at the earliest possible moment, the unity has been bought at a high price. In short, the Roman invitation to unity is one which Anglicans inevitably answer with a divided mind, because they have learnt to value the slow, hesitant path of authority in their own tradition, and because for them also unity and the truth are deeply inter-related (i.e. the way they understand Christian truth determines the kind of unity which they seek, and vice versa).

- (ii) Finally it is worth attempting to see the problem of authority in Christian faith as it now appears in the contemporary situation. Some of the reasons why the notion of authority (religious or secular) is unattractive to the contemporary mind I have tried to outline earlier in this paper.

There seem to be three preeminent difficulties about the traditional Christian way of talking about authority.

(a) Because authority always tends to be conservationist<sup>1</sup>, it appears to be backward-looking. In the case of Christianity, this retrospective look is built in to the very structure of the faith by virtue of the historical element in it; that is to say, the answer to the question 'What is Christianity?' has to be given from scripture and tradition. Modern Western man does not see why or how ancient Palestinian history illuminates his present condition, and the word 'tradition' has almost entirely lost its gilt. It has come to mean the obsolete. Contemporary man, already bewildered by the speed of social and technological change, longs for still faster change; and Africans and Asians, largely

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Charismatic authority is an exception of importance.

non-participants in the technology and affluence of the West, want it even faster than that. (While in the West Christianity is rejected to make room for the future, in Africa and Asia it is rejected to get back to the past, untainted by the exploiting European's religion.)

Moreover, the different communities in Christendom are actually kept apart by their own traditions. We all keep hold of our old Confessions of faith as cards of identity, or even talismans, lest we should be lost in a world where familiar landmarks have been obliterated by sandstorms.

(b) It is uncongenial to contemporary Western man that the Christian gospel is associated with visible, external media. He much prefers the direct knowledge of God professed by the mystic, and does not want either Bible or Church. The visible life of the church in worship, word, and sacrament, is damned as 'institutionalised' - that is to say, the community's order and social structure breed rigidities inimical to the spontaneity and freedom of the spirit (both human and divine). It is no specifically modern difficulty, but in the contemporary climate it is deeply felt. But the rejection of the 'institution' is surely a screen for a rejection of the entire notion that in the gospel God addresses man ab extra. Contemporary man wants to find the Divine, if at all, latent within himself.

(c) One habitual way of regarding Christian belief has been to see it as a set of timeless truths or revealed dogmas which we have to try and apply to the practical problems of life. This monolithic concept of religious truth not only obscures the rich variety and diversity within the Christian tradition itself, but also makes it difficult for a Christian to approach any religious experience outside his own tradition with sympathy and receptivity.

In the last resort, the authority of the Christian faith lies in its truth, in its analysis of human nature and its vision of human destiny. Men will accept it because it strikes the deepest chords in their being, because in believing they have come home as the prodigal to his father. Authority for the Church will not lie in the accidents of past triumphalism, in its social successes or even intellectual triumphs, but in its sure vision of man as God's creature, being restored through the gospel to what he is intended to be.