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# KING'S

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The Problem of Authority <i>James A. Whyte</i>	37
Memory, Time and Incarnation in the Poetry of Edwin Muir <i>Christopher Moody</i>	44
Biblical Language and Exegesis – how far does Structuralism help us? <i>James Barr</i>	48
Reincarnation: The Doctrine of Heredity and Hope in Urhobo Belief <i>M. Y. Nabofa</i>	53
BOOK REVIEWS	57
FACULTY NEWS Insert	

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## THE PROBLEM OF AUTHORITY

### JAMES A. WHYTE

Here is fresh matter, poet,  
Matter for old age meet;  
Might of the Church and the State,  
Their mobs put under their feet.  
O but heart's wine shall run pure  
Mind's bread grow sweet.

That were a cowardly song,  
Wander in dreams no more:  
What if the Church and the State  
Are the mob that howls at the door!  
Wine shall run thick to the end,  
Bread taste sour.<sup>1</sup>

"What if the Church and the State are the mob that howls at the door!"

Yeats poses the problem of authority in terms that are political as well as theological, and these terms would be congenial to many of the liberation theologies current today. It is clear that there is a danger in this attitude, the danger of cynicism, as well as a healthy and necessary realism. I preface this paper with Yeats' poem as a reminder that if there is in some quarters a desire to reassert authority today, the context of that is the profound and widespread scepticism of our age concerning authority in church and state.

I suppose it is with most theologians as it is with me, that the problem of authority has been around, in the background of my thought, for a long time. I can remember at the age of nineteen, as a convinced Christian and a candidate for the ministry, beginning the study of philosophy and having to ask myself "How open-minded am I prepared to be?" I came then to a simple answer, as follows: "My ultimate commitment is to the truth. I believe that Christianity is true, and I shall not lightly abandon it. But if I did not allow my beliefs to be challenged and criticised, and, if necessary, changed, then I would be afraid of the truth, and such an attitude is not faith, but unbelief." I would still hold to that answer, though I am perhaps more aware of the dangers of self-deception than I was at nineteen.

More recently the problem has come into the foreground, partly because the work of a research student led me to read again some of the studies of the '50s and '60s on *The Authoritarian Personality*; partly because the publication of the ARCIC Report in 1976 and again in its final form in 1982 led me to reflect on Authority in the Church; and partly because the business of practical theology leads one constantly to question systematic theology from the point of view of practice: that is, to use Ian Ramsey's terms, it leads away from a deductive theology towards a contextual theology.<sup>2</sup> I want in this paper to try to relate these three things – the psychological studies, the question of authority in the church and the question of authority in theology – and to see if out of these reflections any theory of authority begins to emerge.

### I

Erich Fromm's book *The Fear of Freedom* was published in the United States in 1941 and in Britain the following

year.<sup>3</sup> Fromm was a Freudian analyst, but of a singularly independent mind. He owed much to Marx as well to Freud, but was critical of both. He was particularly concerned with the relationship between psychology and sociology. The problem to which he was seeking an answer in 1941 was why it is that individuals and societies, given the increase in human freedom that has come with widespread democracy, should decide to throw that freedom away and submit to authoritarian regimes. He saw this tendency exemplified typically, but not exclusively, in Fascism and Nazism, and asked what are the tendencies in ourselves, and the conditions in any society, which encourage this "fear of freedom".

Fromm explains the emergence of what he calls "the authoritarian character" in accordance with a psycho-dynamic theory of his own. As a child grows and develops, he or she becomes able to differentiate the self from the rest of the universe: the "primary ties" that have bound the individual to the environment are broken. This process is a process of growth in strength and capability, but also in aloneness and separation. This isolation is a source of great anxiety, because however much self-strength the individual discovers the self is still powerless and isolated before a powerful world. There are two ways, says Fromm, of dealing with this anxiety. One is the impulse to give up one's individuality by submission to the external world. The other is the way of "spontaneous relationship", that is, to enter into relationships of love and co-operation with others. The first Fromm sees as self-defeating, for the primary ties can never be renewed, and the submission only masks and increases the anxiety and the more deeply repressed hostility which the individual feels towards the authority to which he or she submits. The second way, however, is genuinely creative, allowing for continued individual growth and fostering the growth of others.

Fromm sees a parallel between the individual development as he has described it and the development of freedom in human society.

"We see that the process of growing human freedom has the same dialectic character that we have noticed in the process of individual growth. On the one hand it is a process of strength and integration, mastery of nature, growing power of human reason, and growing solidarity with other human beings. But on the other hand this growing individuation means growing isolation, insecurity, and thereby growing doubt concerning one's role in the universe, the meaning of one's life, and with all that a growing feeling of one's own powerlessness and insignificance as an individual." (p. 29)

Fromm speaks of three mechanisms of escape from this dilemma: Authoritarianism, Destructiveness and Automaton Conformity. There is little doubt that in *The Fear of Freedom* the most important of these, the basic mechanism of escape, is Authoritarianism.

Fromm outlines the "authoritarian character" which results from "the tendency to give up the independence of one's own individual self and to fuse one's self with somebody or something outside oneself in order to acquire the strength which the individual self is lacking." (pp.121-122)

The powerless, isolated self which seeks escape from its intolerable anxiety by submission to a powerful authority thereby comes to participate in the power of that authority. "The authoritarian character wins his strength to act through his leaning on superior power. This power is never assailable or changeable. For him lack of power is always an unmistakable sign of guilt and inferiority, and if the authority in which he believes shows signs of weakness, his love and respect change into contempt and hatred." (p.148)

I do not know how plausible psycho-analytic explanations are when they invoke supposed experiences of early childhood to account for the attitudes which humans display in adult life. I am not concerned to defend Fromm's aetiology of the authoritarian character. I find much insight, however, in his description of it. The authoritarian submits to the authority above, abases himself before that authority, indeed, annihilates himself before that authority, proclaiming himself a nothing, worthless, of no account. He is the servant of the cause, nothing more. Yet he can also be the aggressive agent of that powerful cause, sharing in its power. All the hostility against the world, against society, against the angry God whom he fears, which is repressed in his submissiveness, emerges in hostility against the enemies of the cause, in crusades and holy wars, in the extermination of the Jew or the persecution of the heretic or the destruction of the weak. It may be that because of the repressed hostility within, the authoritarian *needs* enemies without, on whom he can project that hostility.

In 1950 the American Jewish Committee published a volume called *The Authoritarian Personality*, by T. W. Adorno and others. The approach was that of experimental psychology rather than psycho-analysis, and the main initial focus was anti-Semitism. This led the researchers to consider what they called "the potentially fascistic individual."<sup>4</sup> Their conclusions were not altogether surprising, and, given the difference in their approaches, remarkably similar to those of Fromm. They found that there was likely to be a close correspondence in the attitudes someone showed in the different areas of their life – to family and sex, to outsiders, to religion and political philosophy.

"Thus a basically hierarchical authoritarian exploitive parent-child relationship is apt to carry over into a power-oriented exploitively dependent attitude towards one's sex partner and one's God, and may well culminate in a political philosophy and social outlook which has no room for anything but a desperate clinging to what appears to be strong and disdainful rejection of whatever is relegated to the bottom."

"Conventionality, rigidity, repressive denial and the ensuing breakthrough of one's weakness, fear and dependency are but other aspects of the same fundamental personality pattern, and they can be observed in personal life as well as in attitudes towards religion and social issues."

At the opposite end from this rigid authoritarian personality they find that "there is a pattern characterized chiefly by affectionate, basically equalitarian and permissive interpersonal relationships. This pattern encompasses attitudes within the family and toward the opposite sex as well as an internalization of religious and social values. Greater flexibility and the potential for more genuine satisfactions appear as results of this basic attitude."

The researchers go on to note that what they have

described are extreme types, and that the majority of people are not in the extremes, but somewhere in the middle.

In 1960 Milton Rokeach and his collaborators published a study entitled *The Open and Closed Mind*<sup>5</sup>. It was a study of belief systems and personality systems. What they called "the dogmatic or closed mind" was "a closed way of thinking which could be associated with an ideology regardless of content, an authoritarian outlook on life, an intolerance towards those with opposing beliefs and a sufferance of those with similar beliefs."

They departed from the "conventional wisdom" in two ways. First, the conventional view is that we categorise people on ethnic or racial grounds, whereas these researchers concluded that the basic criterion is belief, i.e. whether someone's belief system is congruent to ours or not. Racial differences may be no more than handy indicators of this. Second, previous studies, perhaps because they were studies of racial prejudice (but perhaps also because of the bias of the researchers) had assumed that the authoritarian personality is a right-wing phenomenon. Rokeach showed that this is not so. One finds left-wing intolerance as well as right-wing intolerance, authoritarianism of the left as well as of the right.

With these differences, the closed and open mind of Rokeach corresponds to the authoritarian and tolerant characters of Fromm and Adorno, and there is a similar thought of a continuum between two extremes. Authoritarianism at one end is characterised by "fear of aloneness and isolation, anxiety and self-hate", whereas the open mind enjoys the new and unfamiliar. But most people are in the middle.

They acknowledge also, and this seems to me to be an important addendum, that we respond not only according to character types, but according to situation. The more threatening the situation, the more likely we are to respond in an authoritarian manner. In a study of Church Councils, they suggested that the number, the dogmatism and the punitiveness of the Canons of Councils varied in proportion to the perceived threat to the church in the heresy or schism that was being faced.. (During the student troubles of the late 1960s the observable technique of the agitators – who have now moved on to higher things – was to provoke liberal academics into uncharacteristically repressive and authoritarian behaviour by creating situations that were totally irrational and utterly frustrating. The technique usually succeeded.)

I mention one other study, which can act as a bridge to the second part of the paper. In 1976 Jack Dominian published a little book called simply *Authority*.<sup>6</sup> It promptly went out of print, and for a time I feared that authority had done its worst, but happily it has reappeared. Dominian distinguishes between authority and authoritarianism. He sees authoritarianism in terms similar to those outlined above, and understands it as "the failure of growth of the personality". (p.10) He points out how commonly it is to be found within the Christian church. "It does not require much imagination to see that Christianity as popularly conceived and misinterpreted by its most zealous and ardent adherents would include in its ranks such authoritarian personalities. Whether such ardent advocates of Christianity belong to the hot-gospeller variety or the sophisticated intellectual version, they use Christ as a symbol to support

just about everything that would have been repudiated as a proper Christian attitude by the originator of that faith.” (p.12) “The Christian community has fostered ideals which have encouraged the characteristics of early childhood immaturity, and have perpetuated that immaturity in its various structures, particularly the priesthood.” (p.82)

Genuine authority Dominian understands as enabling rather than disabling, encouraging growth to maturity rather than regression to immaturity. “Service is the key to authority. But service means personal availability, and the authority of Christ, as indeed of every Christian, is to be identified in the rendering of service which makes the self available to others.” (p.92) Whether in church or in state, authority should act as a “source of service to the community and not as a source of irresponsible power which moves from service to coercion, from care to subjugation, from encouragement of maturity to that of immaturity.” (p.84) Hence, “mature evaluation of the actions of legitimate authority, not blind obedience to authority, is what Christianity must foster.” (p.83)

As a loyal Roman Catholic, Dominian believes that the structures of the church can serve such an ideal. “Far from wishing to dismiss or destroy its hierarchical structure of Pope, bishops, priests, nuns and laity, I am sure that its basic structure in terms of these offices is an appropriate one, provided they are all seen, lived and offered as models of service and not copies of a secular power structure, operating on the principles of power, coercion, fear, guilt and massive impersonality.” (p.84)

It seems, indeed, that Dominian is looking for a more profound revolution than any structural change would involve, but whether such a revolution in attitudes would not also destroy or radically alter the structures of authority in the church is another question.

## II

In 1977 there was published an agreed statement on *Authority in the Church* (Venice, 1976) by the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission. This was followed in 1981 by an *Elucidation* and a further statement on outstanding issues, *Authority in the Church II*, and all these documents formed part of the *Final Report* of the Commission, published in 1982.<sup>7</sup>

The Introduction to Venice 1976 begins with an unexceptionable statement of the authority of Christ. “The confession of Christ as Lord is the heart of the Christian faith. To him God has given all authority in heaven and on earth.” The statement then proceeds in a section on Christian authority to trace a line of authority through the apostolic preaching to the New Testament witness and to the Christian community today. “Consequently the inspired documents in which this is related came to be accepted by the Church as a normative record of the authentic foundation of the faith . . . Through these written words the authority of the Word of God is conveyed.” Through the Spirit of God who “maintains the people of God in obedience” and “safeguards their faithfulness to the revelation of Jesus Christ” “the authority of the Lord is active in the Church.” “This is Christian authority: when Christians so act and speak, men perceive the authoritative word of Christ.”

The second section, on Authority in the Church, begins by referring to those in the Church who, because of the quality of their personal commitment, are recognised as having personal authority. It then proceeds immediately to the authority of the ordained ministry. “There are some whom the Holy Spirit commissions through ordination for service to the whole community. . . . This pastoral authority belongs primarily to the bishop . . . He can require the compliance necessary to maintain faith and charity in daily life.” The statement then goes on to consider Authority in the Communion of Churches, Authority in Matters of Faith and Conciliar and Primatial Authority.

I think I have given enough of the argument to show that this is a very bland statement, which moves smoothly from the authority of Christ, through the authority of Scripture and on to the official authority of the bishop, and finally to the Primatial see, without any apparent awareness that the nature of authority has radically changed as the argument proceeds. This is because of a one-sided view of the church. One might call it Docetic, or even Monophysite, or perhaps simply triumphalist. The human nature of the church is not taken seriously enough for it in any way to affect the divine. The development of the church’s hierarchical organisation and the exercise of its authority are seen as the triumphal progress of the Holy Spirit. There is no need for any discernment of the Spirit. It is, to be sure, acknowledged (Para. 7) that “the authorities in the Church cannot adequately reflect Christ’s authority because they are still subject to the limitations and sinfulness of human nature. Awareness of this inadequacy is a constant summons to reform.” But such awareness is qualified by the comforting thought that “the Holy Spirit keeps the Church under the Lordship of Christ who, taking full account of human weakness, has promised never to abandon his people.” So the inadequacy of human beings in the church is never allowed to become serious. The Holy Spirit protects them from error.<sup>8</sup>

“The historical mythology”, as Edward Farley has called it, of a historic episcopate receiving its authority ultimately from Christ, is, of course, unquestioned here. Yet there are points where it could be questioned in the argument of the statement itself. First, when the authority of Christ passes over into the authority of Scripture. Here a Barthian view of the relation between the Incarnate Word and the Written Word (as historical testimony to the Incarnate Word) is used, with all its excessive christocentrism. (It is not made clear how the Old Testament becomes authoritative.) Questions about the diversity of the New Testament witness and its historical unreliability (the type of question dealt with by Richard Hanson in his essay on “The Authority of the Christian Faith”) do not appear here. A single form of official ministry, exercising authority in the church, is assumed to be original and universal; an assumption which, as writers such as Von Campenhausen and Eduard Schweizer have shown, is simply not borne out by a study of the New Testament itself, especially the letters of Paul or of John. Second, at the point where one passes from personal to official authority, there is no recognition that authority here may have changed character. (Nor is there recognition that there may be degrees of authority: it seems that authority requires to be absolute, totally reliable, able to command compliance.) It is, of course, recognised that authority in the church ought to be modelled on Christ’s loving service, but in this document, as in so many ecumenical statements about the church, what ought to be is

assumed to be what is. The discrepancy between the church as it ought to be and the church as it is is not allowed to interrupt the free flow of the argument.

This confusion of the ideal and the real is, as I have said, very common in ecclesiastical and ecumenical pronouncements. In the matter of official authority, however, I would argue that the ideal itself is unrealistic. It is a feature of all official authority, whether in church or in state, that it has a tendency to become dominating and disabling authority rather than serving and enabling authority, no matter what the good intentions of its authors are. Authority requires to be constantly open to challenge, to criticism and to correction.

According to the Statement, authority in matters of faith is exercised both by councils and by the primatial see. "In times of crisis or when fundamental matters of faith are in question, the Church can make judgments, consonant with Scripture, which are authoritative. When the Church meets in ecumenical council its decisions on fundamental matters of faith exclude what is erroneous." "This binding authority does not belong to every conciliar decree, but only to those which formulate the central truths of salvation. This authority is ascribed in both our traditions to decisions of the ecumenical councils of the first centuries." In the second statement the church's teaching authority seems to be a little more circumscribed, when it is stated that "the assurance of the truthfulness of its teaching rests ultimately rather upon its fidelity to the Gospel than upon the character or office of the person by whom it is expressed. The Church's teaching is proclaimed because it is true; it is not true simply because it has been proclaimed." It is comforting to know that the members of the Commission are not nominalists. But what they give us is in fact a circular argument, which is the characteristic form of the argument from authority. The argument might be expressed in this way. "The decisions of councils or pope on fundamental matters of faith are not true because they are authoritative. They are authoritative because they are true. They are true because they are authentic interpretations of apostolic faith and witness. They are authentic interpretations of apostolic faith and witness because the Holy Spirit guards from error those who have been given the authority to make such pronouncements."

I am aware that my fundamental disagreement with the understanding of the church and of the Holy Spirit contained in the ARCIC Report makes it difficult for me to be entirely fair, and I hope that I have not been unduly unfair. It is not that these positions and arguments are new. They are familiar to most of us from Roman Catholic and Anglo-Catholic writing. What is new is their appearance in a succinct form in an agreed statement. What is to be noted is the central importance of the question of authority for this view of the church. The church, on this view, is essentially a structure of authority.

### III

When one looks seriously at the question of authority in theology, it seems as if theologians addressed themselves to little else. Robert Clyde Johnson's study, *Authority in Protestant Theology* becomes a survey of Protestant theology from Luther to Barth.<sup>9</sup> I have found recent contributions by W. A. Whitehouse, Richard Hanson and Nicholas Lash

helpful, the last named especially.<sup>10</sup> Edward Farley's book *Ecclesial Reflection* is perplexing in many ways, but also stimulating with its thesis that "theological thinking in the classical criteriology is a method of authority", and his insistence that the house of authority has collapsed. "In spite of enormous efforts to keep the house propped up, what remains is a verbal house, occurring in both the rhetorical and the up-to-date language of church gatherings, writing and even official declarations."<sup>11</sup>

We do, of course, believe many things on authority in our everyday life. When I was ill, I accepted the authority of my doctor, believed his diagnosis and followed the treatment prescribed. I had good reason for this, both in the general reputation of the medical profession in this country and in my own previous experience of this particular doctor.<sup>12</sup> We accept the authority of doctors, scientists and specialists of many kinds, because there is good evidence that they know what they are talking about. But part of the evidence is that they themselves do not hold their knowledge simply on authority, but are continually questioning, testing, exploring, constructing new hypotheses in order to correct as well as to expand their knowledge and competence. And even I, as far as my own competence extends, may question the authorities on the basis of evidence available to me. If the medicine my doctor prescribes leaves my symptoms unabated and produces a few extra on the side, I may, after a decent interval (if I survive) begin to doubt his competence. If I don't my bereaved relatives will.

Theology based on authority is different from this, however, for it does not and should not require or desire evidence. Once you admit the relevance of evidence that might confirm your beliefs, you are bound to admit the possibility of evidence that could refute them. This is to step outside the house of authority. Basil Mitchell has observed "If factual investigation can be appealed to in support of theological insights – if the proven evils of broken homes can be adduced in support of 'the divinely ordained harmony of marriage' – then, were this support to be lacking, or were evidence to the contrary to accumulate, the theological position would to that extent be weakened and might, in principle, even be refuted. There is a marked reluctance on the part of some people to expose religious doctrines to this sort of test."<sup>13</sup>

The argument from authority is always circular. It is therefore insulated from the danger of challenge or refutation from any world outside of itself, but it has difficulty in establishing any relationship at all to such a world. Authority makes evidence unnecessary. Theology becomes hermeneutic, the interpretation of the authoritative texts, that is, dogmatic theology. Theology's rationality is demonstrated in the creation of a system, in which all parts can be shown to cohere, that is systematic theology. There is a strong and persistent tradition of this kind in Protestant theology. Within the system there is, of course, a place for Apologetics or the Philosophy of Religion, and a place also for Practical Theology. But the former is expected to make its way back to the dogmatics from which it has implicitly begun, and the latter is misunderstood as Applied Theology, the application to the life of the church of the doctrines provided for it by dogmatic theology.

It could be claimed that this theological circle is not vicious, but virtuous. In philosophy it is necessary to distinguish between a theory of truth and a criterion of

truth, and it is possible to claim that whatever one's theory of truth (correspondence with reality, whatever that means?), the only available criterion of truth is coherence. Why should it not be so in theology, where we do not have direct experience of the realities of which we speak, and where the coherence of the system may therefore be the best available criterion of its truth? The answer, I think, is that if I use coherence as a criterion of truth it is in relation to my experience as a whole. (And it is thus, I believe.) But the theological circle, so long as one remains in "the house of authority" seems to me to be always limited. If you become open to the whole of experience, you leave the house of authority. And you are then constrained to ask whether the house itself is part of the real world, or is a fantasy world.

There are some today who are trying to maintain and even repair the house of authority, to make it a decent place to live in; some are looking for a respectable and not too dangerous way out; while some onlookers and some ecclesiastics are terrified of what people will do if they are allowed out.

Modern Biblicism or Fundamentalism remains quite frankly and happily, it seems, within the house. At a very simple level the argument is circular. If I ask a fundamentalist student how he knows that what he believes about the Bible is true, he is almost certain to quote to me 2 Tim. 3:16, in the Authorised version. The authority of the Bible establishes the authority of the Bible.

Traditionalism, if I may use that term to describe the location of authority in a particular reconstruction of the development of the early church, similarly seeks to remain within the house of authority. The "three-fold ministry", apostolic succession, the early councils and the Nicene Creed provide the locus of authority. But there is in fact no one single tradition, within the New Testament or in the early Christian writings. The understanding of Christianity and the church in the Pastoral epistles is markedly different from that in the Johannine letters. When Clement of Rome writes to the Corinthians his concept of authority in the church is widely different from that of Paul in his letters to the same destination. Between the Didache and the letter to the Romans there is a world of difference.<sup>14</sup> Traditionalism seems plausible only if you make the assumption that whatever prevails in the church is the work of the Holy Spirit, who has promised to preserve the church infallible in essential faith and morals. This view certainly remains within the house of authority, for it is not supported by evidence, nor does there seem to be any reason other than a decision of authority which gives such a radically different status to certain developments in certain periods of the early church.

The structure of authority may also be maintained through Confessionalism. The first time I was involved in discussions with Scandinavian Lutheran theologians I was struck by the way in which some of them would seek to clinch every argument with a quotation from the Augsburg Confession. "Augustana locuta est, causa finita est" seemed to be the principle.

The place and use of confessions of faith in the Reformed churches is a tempting subject. The Reformed principle was *sola gratia, sola fide, sola scriptura*. If, as I believe, that "by grace alone, by faith alone" is the heart of the Reformation, and the heart of the Gospel, the Reformers

would have contended that the priority and sufficiency of grace and faith, which had been obscured in the structure of authority of the Roman church, could be maintained and defended only *sola scriptura*, by scripture alone. The third principle was necessary to protect the other two. But this was not exactly a simple solution to the problem of authority. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, even when you have shed the Apocrypha, remain a confused and confusing literature when you are looking for a clear and authoritative basis for theology.

So the Reformed churches felt the need for confessions of faith, manifestos of the movement by which they showed the sense in which they understood the scripture. They were that and nothing more. The authors of the Scots Confession invited anyone who found in it anything "repugnant to God's halie word" to let them know, and promised satisfaction or reformation. The confessions were many, because they were written to their time, and no one of them claimed to be a complete, permanent or uniquely authoritative statement of the faith. The Church of Scotland had the Scots Confession of 1560; but the General Assembly could later receive the Second Helvetic Confession, and commend it to the church, and approve also Craig's Negative Confession, which was to become the basis of the National Covenant.

This seems to me to be a healthy situation. As regards creeds and confessions our principle should be "The more, the merrier", or "There's safety in numbers." It is when we reduce them to one alone, and when that human document begins to claim divine authority, that there is the devil to pay. A. N. Whitehead said "Wherever there is a creed, there is a heretic round the corner, or in his grave." This is not only because creeds are produced in an attempt to counter and silence heresy, but because thereafter the development of critical and questioning thought becomes heresy. Creeds create heresy.

In Scotland in the 17th century, while Scripture was dutifully regarded as the supreme rule of faith and life, the Westminster Confession of 1645 was adopted as the subordinate standard, and attained legal status. Thereafter in the theological controversy within the church – over the Marrow Men in the 18th century or over the Atonement in the 19th – the real issue was not one of ultimate truth, or of conformity to scripture, but of agreement with the Confession of Faith. The question was not whether or not a theological opinion was true, or whether or not it was biblical, if it was not in accordance with the Confession it might not be preached in the church and those who taught it might not retain office and (most important) might not draw their stipends.

The main Presbyterian churches in Scotland eventually extricated themselves from this situation, and allowed the development of theology, by modifying their subscription to the Confession, and allowing a deliberately undefined "liberty of opinion". (It was assumed that there was in the Confession something called "the substance of the faith", which one must believe, but no one ever defined what it was.) This happy state of affairs, which had about it the touch of genius, is soon, alas, to come to an end. From the 1960s on there have been complaints in the General Assembly that the church no longer has an instrument to counter heresy. In many recent debates in the General Assembly about the Westminster Confession and about

what should take its place, I do not remember anyone questioning the place of the Scriptures as “the supreme rule of faith and life”, but I do not remember anyone seriously suggesting that the Scriptures themselves might be sufficient as the standard of faith. So much for the principle of *sola scriptura*.

It has been noted that theology within the circle of authority becomes hermeneutic. Indeed, hermeneutic problems become important because when you have an authoritative document, be it biblical text, Council decree or Confession of Faith, with which you are not allowed to disagree, in the sense of saying bluntly that on this or that point it is false, your only room for manoeuvre lies in the possibility of interpreting it in a new way. Only through interpretation does one have any freedom to develop theology. Such interpretation may sometimes be stretched up to the limit of human ingenuity and beyond that of credibility, as when the Thirty-Nine Articles are interpreted in a catholic sense in spite of their apparent Calvinistic meaning. But one can sympathise with this necessity, since if you are within the circle of authority it is interpretation alone which can give you room to breathe.

But apart from that necessity, we recognise today that interpretation is necessary when you are dealing with any document, especially an ancient document. The original meaning of the Thirty-Nine Articles is not necessarily obvious today, and the things which they say to us may not be what was intended in the 16th century. But once you recognise the necessity of interpretation, the existence of a hermeneutic problem, the question of authority becomes open once more, and we are being pushed out of the house, out of the circle. The text has undoubted authority, we say, if only we knew what it really meant. But can we give that same authority to our interpretation of the text, which, after all, is only one possible interpretation among many? Those who require an authority that will give them certainties must find some way of doing this. This is why Fundamentalists deny that they are interpreting. Otherwise they would have to admit the truth of James Barr's contention that what they claim to be the authority of the Word of God is really the authority of a particular tradition of interpretation.

One can deal with the problem of the authority of written documents by making it clear that one's ultimate authority lies behind the documents, whether these are the Bible or the Creeds. Barth's three-fold form of the Word of God does this, but Barth uses it simply to rebuild the house of authority. The ARCIC document does this too, and then moves without a hiccup to the reassertion of ecclesiastical authority. But supposing we agree, as I would, with W. A. Whitehouse that “to attribute absolute authority to anything which is not God is blasphemous.”<sup>15</sup> All other authority, therefore, must be regarded as relative. To say that all human authority, including that of the Bible writers, the Early Fathers, Church Councils, the Pope, and even the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland is human and relative is not to say that it is nugatory. It is possible to accord to such authorities a high degree of respect, without ceasing to regard them as relative.

The question then to be asked of such relative authorities is “Do they, and if so, how do they relate to the authority of God?” P. T. Forsyth expresses the conviction “that an authority of any practical kind draws its meaning and its right only from the soul's relation to its God, that this

is so not only for religion strictly so called, nor for a church, but for public life, social life, and the whole history and career of humanity.”<sup>16</sup> Forsyth's concern is to show that all human authority, in social life as well as in religion, is relative and conditional, and carries weight in so far as it is itself a response to the moral claim that God makes on human life. “All questions run up into moral questions; and all moral questions centre in the religious, in man's attitude to the supreme ethic, which is the action of the Holy One.” If this is so then the relation of the divine authority to human authority is not so much to establish it as to limit it. On the other hand, those who by a smooth progression derive ecclesiastical authority from the authority of God do so not to limit it but to claim (sometimes explicitly, but often implicitly) that the human authority partakes of the divine infallibility. Human beings often seek to divinise their own authority, claiming in their own sphere the Divine Right of Kings. But it need not always be so. John Baillie spoke of how in his childhood, he was under the authority of the older members of the household. “Yet my earliest memories clearly contain the knowledge that these elders did but transmit and administer an authority of which they were not themselves the ultimate source.”<sup>17</sup> Those who understand aright the relation between their human authority and the ultimate authority see it as limit and responsibility.

Forsyth wrote in strong reaction to the view that placed the locus of authority in religious experience. But if we are to move out of the house of authority, and keep the question-mark which puts a limit to all human authority, theological, ecclesiastical, political, it will not be by finding some other source of authority (which will turn out to be another human authority in disguise), but by taking seriously the reality of human experience – not, however, religious experience alone, but human experience.

In 1972 Ian Ramsey read a paper to a conference of Church Leaders in which he said that theology could no longer be deductive but contextual. By deductive theology he meant what I have called theology within the circle of authority, whereby you deduce your doctrines from the text and then apply them to the human situation. Contextual theology, on the other hand, is theology in the context of human life as it is today. In the years that have followed I have, I confess, grown a little tired of those who call on us to “do” theology in all sorts of unlikely places – the only really unsuitable place, it seems, being the theologian's study. If contextual theology is not to be the slave of rapidly changing social and political fads, and is to exercise a genuinely critical function on human (and that includes ecclesiastical) life, we need to define better the relation between contextual theology and the Christian tradition or traditions. Perhaps a Christian contextual theology must have two starting points, not one. The first is the Christian datum, however we express it, as something which we have not invented, and do not need to discover as though we knew nothing of it already. The second is the context of our life and our time. Sometimes this will be as specific as a particular pastoral interview or a particular social injustice, but even then, and always, it must have in view, as far as we are able, the integrity of our experience as human beings in this particular time. The conversation between the context and the tradition must be one in which each side is free to criticise the other.

#### IV

In order to bring together the different parts of this paper I conclude with a possible conversation between context and tradition on the subject of authority. A theologian considering the subject of authority might begin with the tradition and ponder, as we have done, the place of authority in Biblical, ecclesiastical and theological tradition, and the problems, the antinomies of authority. He might then consider the context, including what is known about authority in psychological study and human experience today, and he might use the material to which I drew attention in the first section of this paper. This understanding of the authoritarian character as something which exists in all of us (for we are all somewhere in the middle), but exists as a failure to grow into maturity, an expression of our weakness, not our strength, of our fear and not our faith, might lead our theologian back to the Christian tradition, to the saying of Jesus reported by Matthew and Luke. In Matthew it is "You know that in the world, rulers lord it over their subjects, and their great men make them feel the weight of authority; but it shall not be so with you. Among you, whoever wants to be great must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be the willing slave of all – like the Son of Man; he did not come to be served but to serve, and to give up his life a ransom for many." (Matt. 20:25ff. cf. Luke 22:25ff.)

He might find here a new view of authority, as serving rather than dominating, as enabling rather than disabling, a service of others which encourages them to grow rather than a domination which keeps them as children. He might then chance to read Gordon Dunstan's essay in which he says that both Jesus and Paul were not just authoritative but authoritarians and that authoritarianism is strongly present in the Christian tradition.<sup>18</sup> Returning, somewhat puzzled, to the New Testament, he could decide that Dunstan was wrong about Jesus and Paul, but right about the Christian tradition. He might wonder whether one reason for this is that the tradition has never applied to God the saying of Jesus about authority, and still thinks of God's authority as in the line of the rulers of the Gentiles, rather than in the line of Jesus.

It is quite possible that at this point our theologian might become quite cynical about all authority in church and in state, and he will not be short of evidence in the contemporary world to support such cynicism. But if he happens to have lying around somewhere in his understanding of the Christian tradition some form of the doctrine of the Two Kingdoms, he may reflect that under the conditions of this world we need some kind of order, some structures of authority. That is a sociological and psychological necessity. And if our contextual theologian has also in his knapsack somewhere some kind of doctrine of sin, and especially if he has read Reinhold Niebuhr, he will not need Shakespeare to tell him that

"man, proud man,  
Dress'd in a little brief authority,  
Most ignorant of what he's most assur'd,  
His glassy essence like the angry ape,  
Plays such fantastic tricks before the high heaven  
As make the angels weep."

And there is evidence enough for that in our contemporary world. He may also reflect that the tendency for all official authority to become dominating authority, whatever

the good intentions of the authors, is not simply because authority feeds the pride of those who exercise it, but because it encourages the regression of those who are under it, who readily invest their leaders with magic powers, and sit back waiting for miracles to happen. In particular, the strong regressive tendency in religion is a constant temptation to authoritarianism. But authoritarianism represents the uncreative (if not positively destructive) way of dealing with our regressive needs. Therefore a healthy religion is threatened by authoritarianism more than by anything else. Those who seem to believe that the Christian church is exempt from the conditions of this world, and who wish to invest it with absolute, unassailable, infallible authority have done the church and the world no service. If the church and the state are not to be the mob that howls at the door, their authority needs to be limited, controlled, criticised, scrutinised and not simply respected, obeyed and maintained.

#### Notes

1. "Church and State" (August 1934), from *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (London, Macmillan, 1961) p. 327.
2. The reference is to a paper read by Dr. Ramsey to the Church Leaders' Conference, Birmingham, 1972.
3. It is still in print. E. Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1942, 17th imp. 1980).
4. T. W. Adorno *et al.*, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York, Wiley, 1950, 1964).
5. M. Rokeach *et al.*, *The Open and Closed Mind* (New York, Basic Books, 1960).
6. J. Dominion, *Authority* (London, Burns Oates, 1976).
7. Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, *The Final Report* (London, CTS/SPCK, 1982). See also E. J. Yarnold, S. J. & Henry Chadwick, *Truth and Authority* (London, CTS/SPCK, 1977).
8. The recent World Council of Churches report *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* states the same view in almost the same terms. "The Holy Spirit keeps the church in the truth and guides it despite the frailty of its members." (III, 1, 3).
9. R. C. Johnson, *Authority in Protestant Theology* (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1959).
10. W. A. Whitehouse, "Authority, Human and Divine" in *The Authority of Grace*, A. H. Loades (ed.) (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1981).  
R. Hanson, "The Authority of the Christian Faith" in *Theology and Change*, R. H. Preston (ed.) (London, SCM, 1975), N. Lash, *Voices of Authority* (London, Sheed & Ward, 1976).
11. E. Farley, *Ecclesial Reflection* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1982), p. 108 and pp. 165f.
12. Thomas, of course, held that it is reason which establishes the authority, faith which believes it.
13. B. Mitchell, *Law, Morality and Religion in a Secular Society* (London, OUP, 1970) p. 118. cf. W. Keller, *The Bible as History* (ET, W. Neil, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1956). Keller's sub-title "Archaeology confirms the Book of Books" is a claim not quite substantiated by his text. But if archaeology can confirm the Bible, it can, conceivably, disprove it.
14. cf. H. von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power* (ET, J. A. Baker, London, A. & C. Black, 1969) and E. Schweizer, *Church Order in the New Testament* (ET, F. Clarke, London, SCM, 1961).
15. *op. cit.* p. 240.
16. P. T. Forsyth, *The Principle of Authority* (London, Independent Press, 1913, 1952), pp. 2-3.
17. J. Baillie, *Invitation to Pilgrimage* (London, OUP, 1942), p. 37.
18. G. R. Dunstan, "Authority and Personality in the Christian Tradition", I. T. Ramsey and R. Porter (eds.), *Personality and Science* (Edinburgh, Churchill Livingstone, 1971).