

# AUTHORITY AND PATERNALISM

By JACK DOMINIAN

**A**LTHOUGH ROMAN CATHOLICS have focussed on the problems of authority as they affect the life and organization of the Church, it should be stated at once that coming to terms with an authoritarian system is not a preoccupation exclusive to them. The challenge to authority affects every major aspect of life: industry, the professions, political life and personal relations within the family. In all these spheres a basic transformation is taking place.

This involves a change in relationship between those who are in positions of authority and power, and those who are subject to them: those capable of issuing instructions and those who are accountable to their superiors for their performance, and ultimately subject to sanctions if they fail to satisfy the required criteria. This age-long relationship between superior and subordinate is now under the greatest possible strain; for the balance of power is shifting decisively from one to the other. This movement is controlled by economic forces, an increasing acceptance of the dignity of all human beings independent of hierarchical status, the growing equality accorded to women, and, generally, by the protection which society as a whole is offering to all those in a dependent role.

Such changes stand in opposition to the limited but most effective concept of authority as the exercise of an absolute power responsible for the efficient and safe ordering of any organization: those organizations in which an oligarchy of officials – who are either self-appointed, selected from a restricted cabal or appointed by tradition without election – could rule by the use of power, sanction and coercion in such a way that order was maintained and the appropriate goals of the organization achieved.

## *The Family*

The prototype of such an organization with a figure who until recently had, if not absolute authority, then the nearest equivalent, has been for a very long time the family and the father.

It is thus reasonable to look at the structure of the family for a clarification and understanding of the origin of authority in the human personality.

It is of particular significance to examine this in the roman catholic church, because within it the family nomenclature of father, mother, brother, sister has been retained and allocated to its priestly and religious members. There could be no more powerful reminder of the symbolic significance of these terms than by their retention to describe such significant members of the organization with whom analogous parent-child relationships were continued. The retention of a prefix 'holy', for the pope, left no doubt about the special place held by such a person in the hierarchical structure. Indeed, everyone acknowledged his position; and in many ways obedience to this particular father became the hallmark, the symbol, the sign above all others of a genuine membership of the Church.

While historians may trace accurately the rise of papal power, and its intensification since the reformation, what is infinitely more important psychologically is the fact that, independently of his theological status, the holy Father has undoubtedly become a symbol of immense spiritual significance, in so far as he has been invested with the qualities of power, authority, leadership and protection normally attributed to fatherhood.

Much of the crisis inside the Church can be understood not only in terms of the theological development of the meaning of the Church and the redistribution of power within its membership, but also of the possible diminution of the symbolic significance of the father-figure importance hitherto attached to the holy Father. Since the significance here is intensely subjective and emotional, it is not accessible to erudite consideration. The relationship between pope and catholics has a deep psychological significance which goes well beyond strict theological examination; and the sophisticated papers given by eminent theologians which attempt to define the various limits of the *magisterium* leave the ordinary catholic totally unmoved. His relationship with the pope is not easily amenable to such theological treatment, however legitimate and orthodox the considerations may be.

Such feelings are far better understood in terms of dependence: an emotional dependence which has its roots in childhood and therefore needs time for adequate growth before basic changes in attitudes can take place. Indeed, one common factor, which underlines the variations in response to Vatican II in different countries

and within any particular country or community, is the preparation of the people, lay, priest and religious, for a different psychological relationship with figures of authority. Those continental countries which had this preparation for a longer period are able to assimilate and express more easily the significant changes of Vatican II. Certainly, an intellectual grasp of the changes is not enough, and much of the perplexity and tension is due to the conflict present in many Catholics, including members of the hierarchy, between an intellectual assent to the changes and a psychological (often unconscious) refusal, usually experienced as anxiety, to change. The threatened loss of dependence and the consequent insecurity mobilizes anxiety, which in fact controls the rate of change. This in turn is rationalized, and a perfectly valid excuse is offered, such as that the people are not ready for change. This in fact may mean that the bishop or the priest is not ready for change within himself, and uses the people as a scapegoat. Since the likelihood is that a number of the parishioners will share the same anxieties regarding initiative and independence, there is ample room for what is technically called a collusion: which means that the shared unconscious anxieties between people, bishop or priest dictate the pace and nature of change except for the inevitable minimum sanctioned by the council.

Such collusions are inevitable and account for the slowness of the implementation of the spirit of Vatican II, as well as some of the apparently contradicting and confusing edicts that have emerged since the council. But one great thinker of the age, Freud, insisted that such a collusion accounts for the very existence of the idea, belief and acceptance of God himself the supreme Father.

### *The Universal Illusion*

For Freud, religion was the universal illusion and its determinants in the projection of the earthly father into the heavenly one. In his *New Introductory Lectures*, Freud wrote, in 1933:

The doctrine is then that the universe was created by a being resembling a man, but magnified in every respect in power, wisdom and the strength of his passions, an idealized superman . . . One further point is made easy to recognize, for the God-creator is undisguisedly called 'father'. Psycho-analysis infers that he really is the father, with all the magnificence in which he once appeared to the small child. A religious man pictures the creator of the universe just as he pictures his own origin.

This being so, it is easy to explain how it is that consoling assurances and strict, ethical demands are combined with a cosmogony. For the same person to whom the child owed his existence, the father (or more correctly, no doubt, the parental agency compounded of the father and mother), also protected and watched over him in his feeble and helpless state, exposed as he was to all the dangers lying in wait in the external world; under his father's protection he felt safe. Where a human being has himself grown up, he knows, to be sure, that he is in possession of greater strength; but his insight into the perils of life has also grown greater, and he rightly concludes that fundamentally he still remains just as helpless and unprotected as he was in his childhood: that faced by the world he is still a child. Even now, therefore, he cannot do without the protection which he enjoyed as a child. But he has long since recognized that his father is a being of normally restricted power, and not equipped with every excellence. He therefore harkens back to the mnemonic image of the father whom in his childhood he so greatly overvalued. He exalts the image into a deity and makes it into something contemporary and real. The effective strength of this mnemonic image and the persistence of his need for protection jointly sustain his belief in God.<sup>1</sup>

Freud goes on to add that, as the earthly father not only protects but lays down rules and regulations which have to be obeyed with sanctions, punishments and rewards attached to them, so God rules the world with ethical dictates mediated through the conscience, which experiences guilt in the presence of transgression and peace with obedience.

This brilliant critique of religion has not and cannot be seriously challenged so long as the life of christians remains close to the model which Freud described and the Church has perpetrated. In this paper attention will be drawn to the fact that such a model is basically incompatible with both psychological and spiritual reality in that the role of the father – or the parental unity – is basically of a total and different order altogether. Parents are there, not as Freud postulated, to restrict instinctual gratification and to socialize through sanctions and obedience. Their main purpose is to be available in the service of growth and development of the potential of their children through love. Similarly the Church is not there primarily to preserve the faith by reducing it to proportions which require intellectual assent coupled with canonical regulations which demand obedience. The Church is there to foster growth in the

<sup>1</sup> Freud, S.: *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (Hogarth Press, London), Vol 22 of *Standard Works*.

relationship between man and God; and in particular, since it is the body of Christ, to bring about, to act as a catalyst of, the life of faith which relates every man to Christ. Such an enabling, growth-promoting service can be achieved only in a community which places love at the centre, permeating the core of its existence, and rules and regulations at the periphery. For most catholics brought up in the older tradition, such a concept is difficult, if not incomprehensible. But this is the only formulation that will avoid putting religion, any religion, but particularly christianity, in the trap in which Freud placed it and which has undoubtedly accounted for a massive defection from religious practice in the twentieth century.

### *Super-Ego*

Seen in the traditional authoritarian terms, the role of the parents was principally to lay down a comprehensive system of regulations which provided the framework of growth for the child. This collection of prohibitions, strictures and negative injunctions came primarily from the father. The child incorporated, 'took in', these instructions, making them part of itself, in a part of the psyche which Freud called the *super-ego*.

In his theoretical construction of the human psyche, Freud postulated that the first locus is the primary *id*, a seething mass of disorganized instinctual needs craving for satisfaction. Out of the *id* emerges the *ego*, the child's conscious, evaluating, reality-testing principle which controls the *id*. The *ego* is conscious and acts as the sensitive antennae examining the total situation and pursuing behaviour considered reasonable and acceptable.

On the one hand the *ego* is driven by instinctual needs, on the other by the collective prohibitions of the *super-ego* which has been called the primitive conscience: mistakenly, because conscience is aware of and dialogues with God, and is not simply a conditioned fear-response to approval or punishment, as is the *super-ego*. It is, of course, the authoritative prohibitions of the father which played a large part in the contents of the *super-ego*; and this remained the guiding, instructing, checking part of man, according to Freud. Such a mechanistic and restricted view of morality needs now to be compared with a development of the child, in which it experiences authority as a source of growth.

### *Authority as Source for Growth*

Every human being enters life in a state of total helpless depend-

ence on the parents. This dependence is physical, social and emotional. Physical dependence is self-explanatory. Without the necessary material sustenance of food, shelter, warmth, care and protection against danger, the child will perish. Similarly it depends on its parents for social survival, in terms of the attitudes and values which organize its social life at home, in society and at school. It is from the parents that habits and social experience emanate; and the social background of individuals is a powerful determinant of the later personality.

This social development has attached to it particular significance in terms of education. Perhaps the schooling of the child is the single most important issue on which society and the Church has hitherto concentrated. There can be no doubt about the importance of physical and intellectual growth; but equally there cannot be the slightest doubt that emotional growth is in the final analysis the most important growth of all. Ultimately, the way minds and bodies are used depends on the living experience of the individual, which is largely governed by the inner emotional life. The significance of this has been obscured by the grossly exaggerated importance attached to intellectual growth, expressed in traditional terms through the exercise of mind and will.

The psychological sciences have shown conclusively that the mind and will are not separate, abstract entities, but faculties operating in and through the whole person, and thus influenced by the feelings the person has about himself and others. These feelings are primarily developed in the first few years of life. They are heavily dependent on the feelings the child receives from its parents; for at this stage of life its image of itself is utterly dependent on the cues and signals it receives from the parents, who form the 'significant other'. Since the first decade is one of intense emotional growth, a sensitive and accurate congruence between the child's needs and the parents' response forms the essential background for normal and healthy maturation.

### *Trust*

As Freud and other psychologists have clearly shown, the first experience of the child is that of dependence. The first outcome of such a situation is the need to trust the source of life, care and support. Hence every person, from parents onwards, who finds himself in a similar position of offering trust to others, particularly to those who cannot discriminate the quality of service offered, has

an enormous responsibility, for which he remains accountable to the end of his life, and ultimately to God. The crux of this responsibility is the ability to meet the needs of those dependent on us without creating a relationship of emotional dependency. The sense of trust found in the parents allows the child to learn slowly to trust itself. Here is one principal difference between authority used as a means of growth through the establishment of rules and regulations which lie external to the child, and authority as a service, offering to the child the means of acquiring a separate, independent, inner-directed existence which relies on itself for direction, control and judgment of behaviour. The trust provided by the parents has to become the trust the child learns to place in itself, thus avoiding a life-long dependence on 'significant others' for survival.

### *Autonomy*

How is this trust acquired? Needless to say, the parent has to provide the qualities of continuity, reliability and predictability; in other words, trustworthiness. Most people are familiar with the contradictions of the authoritarian system which offered an ideal model of behaviour not carried out by the parent or the authority that preached it. The roots of hypocrisy lie in such authoritarian contradictions; and much of the contemporary discomfort of authoritarian figures comes from the merciless exposition of this by the young, who are no longer intimidated by fear in their questioning or exposures of falsehood.

Granted that parents are reliable and trustworthy so as to provide a consistent training, the next phase of development is the child's acquisition of autonomy, whose origin the American psychoanalyst Erikson places in the second and third year of life.<sup>2</sup> Although the sense of autonomy begins then, it develops throughout life, as new acquisitions of competence are added to existing ones. In these two years the child acquires an extensive range of capacities. Crawling, walking, talking, feeding itself, exploring objects, toilet-training and much else is acquired during this period.

The important point is that authority – and here the principal one is mother – has the opportunity to allow the child to learn by trial and error at its own pace. If the parent finds this pace too slow or too fast, there enters the risk of taking over and doing the work

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<sup>2</sup> Erikson, E. H.: *Identity* (London, 1968).

for the child. In this instance, the dependence of the child deepens at a time when it should be acquiring its first real experience of independence. Even more damaging is the continuation of such a control hereafter, which restricts the child's experience of personal exploration and verification of its own capacity.

Another important element in this process is the way that failure is treated by the parent. There is certainly plenty of failure and mess, because the acquisition of these features depends on trial and error techniques. If the failure and mess is invested with a sense of shame and badness, then the beginning of a severe *super-ego* is being laid down. If each failure is minimized and every success reinforced with approval, then the rudiments of self-esteem and a positive acceptance of self is established. Since creativity, competence and self-acceptance remain fundamental human characteristics throughout the duration of life, the feelings attached to failure and success are crucial for the creative capacity and self-esteem of a person. If a challenge is approached with marked doubt and lack of confidence, coupled with a fear of failure and a dread of the accompanying shame, the range of exploration and creativity is likely to be limited, and much greater reliance will be placed on those who are competent and successful. These are, of course, those invested with the authority to know and understand: those having all the answers.

The sense of autonomy and shame, which Erikson places as beginning in the second and third years, is followed by the sense of initiative and guilt in the fourth and fifth years. Having acquired the rudiments of survival, the child proceeds to leave the safety of mother's immediate circle and explore further the world at home and in the neighbourhood. Such exploration is now capable of bringing far greater rewards to the child and much worry to the parents. When things go right there is noise, peals of laughter, excitement and joy; and when things go wrong there is broken glass, dirt, injured bodies and minds, tears and worry for the parents.

The stage is now set for the potential restriction of such initiative; and the child is instructed to do things which avoid disturbance. The restriction of initiative and the multiplication of rules and regulations are carried out by the authoritarian home not for the safety of the child but for the peace of mind of the parent. There are obviously limits which need to be imposed for the child's safety; but these have to be distinguished from those which serve to reduce the anxiety of the parents. And often anxiety plays a prominent



part in creating the authoritarian personality which needs to control for the sake of feeling safe. Under these circumstances, disobedience makes the child feel bad; so that a combination of shame and guilt forms the emotional atmosphere in which the identity of the child develops.

At this stage it is useful to compare and contrast authority as the source of growth and as a means of laying down rules and regulations for safe conduct. In the former, every indication of autonomy and initiative on the part of the child is approved, appreciated and returned to its owner as a permanent feature of its own competence, strength, independence and personal value. When things go wrong they are recognized as such, but the child is not invested with a sense of badness; fear or guilt plays a minor educational role. In the latter, the child comes to recognize very quickly that approval and peace depend on obedience to rules and regulations. Transgression of these is a serious matter which means disapproval and, gradually, the acquisition of feelings of regret. Everything that is good depends on meeting the criteria set up by parents and ultimately the father, frequently the last source of sanctions within the family.

In the extreme position of dependency, a child can acquire a severe *super-ego* which experiences life in the following terms. Everything it does depends first and foremost on the approval of authority. In any case, authority is always more knowledgeable and wiser; and there is no point in competing, because the inevitable result is defeat. On the contrary, everything parents and teachers do is good and wise; indeed it is very good and very wise. Thus the figure of authority comes to be idealized. By comparison the child remains helpless, liable to go wrong if it follows its inner world. Under such circumstances it can expect little else than disaster which, when it happens, will plunge its inner world into acute feelings of shame, embarrassment and guilt. Such guilt can only be alleviated by the promise of absolute obedience in the future and full reparation for the badness in the present. At some stage, such a relationship leads to an inner sense of despair. The child grows up trying to attain its autonomy and leans more and more on the external strength of the obviously wise and strong. Its personality is largely dictated by a series of prohibitions, which it follows faithfully, and, not surprisingly, finds that such a course earns approval and acceptance and is the passport to 'goodness'.

The real self in these circumstances never develops. In its place

a false self emerges, composed of the direction, strength, unquestioned values and attitudes of the authority figures which, in the traditional paternalistic system, represented heavily the views of the father, as the one having ultimate responsibility for law and order in the family. It was an easy step to move on from this authoritarian structure, at home and in the school, to the life of the Church, where 'fathers' and 'mothers', and ultimately 'holy fathers' and 'holy mothers', exercised supreme significance.

### *Authority Challenged*

Suddenly all this, which was challenged by the few, has been challenged by the many. Indeed the Church, in a period of self-reflection, began to question many of these assumptions as it assimilated the persistent enquiries in the world around it, which hitherto it had steadfastly refused to acknowledge as existing. Initially, the results were bound to be difficult, if not disastrous. For the first time for very many years, authority opened the door of enquiry and criticism and found itself overwhelmed by the accumulated resentment and anger, indeed the fury, of many. As the principles of absolute obedience and idealization collapsed, authority was not only questioned but relentlessly pushed to give an account of itself, to justify its position. Those who felt denied their growth, maturation and autonomy turned their adulation into frustration and anger, as they discovered the lack of opportunity for their proper development. Some have felt cheated, acutely so. Such an understandable reaction blurs the sense of perspective, and hostility becomes excessive and destructive.

Some of those who ran their lives on the basis of an acute sense of sin, badness and guilt – the powerful pillars of moral growth under the authoritarian system, decided they could ignore these feelings; and a wave of disobedience, *anomie* and indifference has emerged inside the Church (and, indeed, throughout society, which is grappling with the same problem). Anyone remotely aware of the psychological implications of the authoritarian system could have predicted this, and can understand the endless arguments which are occurring inside the Church for more freedom on the one hand and more obedience on the other. Perhaps given the scale of the change, future historians might consider that the range of disturbance is very limited indeed, and that the Church is negotiating the change with greater equanimity than would appear at first sight.

One thing is certain, and should give every christian a deep sense of comfort and reassurance. Unlike the country at large, which is exploring blindly alternatives to the authoritarian structures, the christian community need not look further than the gospels for its purpose and direction. Service in the interest of care and growth is no stranger to the 'good news'. Those with a real faith must welcome all the questioning, doubting and penetrating enquiry of our age, since this is no prelude to loss of faith but a shaking-out of a structure fundamentally inimical to christianity.

### *The New Testament*

In the New Testament the word 'hierarchy' does not occur at all. *Arche* (rule, authority) is used ten times, but is never applied to the Church authorities. *Taxis* (order, position) is also used ten times, but is equally not applied to the Church authorities. *Time* (honour, reverence) used only in the sense of 'dignity' of Christ and the priesthood of Aaron. *Exousia*, which means power, authority, occurs ninety-five times; but it is used only seven times in its strict sense of power. In five, Jesus gives his disciples authority to drive out devils.<sup>3</sup> In two passages, the reference is to the authority invested in the Apostle as a minister of the work God does in the Church: and this is the building up of the Body in Christ or of the Temple built of living stones.<sup>4</sup> In both cases, St Paul declares that he has received *exousia* in order to build and not to destroy.<sup>5</sup> Essentially this building up is through the presence of various offices in the Church; and all these offices are included in the *diakonia* or service. Service is a universal value co-extensive and identical with christian life itself.

At this point, everyone would agree that service is the hallmark of the use of authority in the New Testament. But service for what? Surely, the authoritarian philosophy would reply, to maintain a relationship between man and God which acknowledges the latter's transcendence, omnipotence, absolutism, and man's dependence, helplessness, sinfulness: and therefore the superior-inferior, master-pupil, parent-child relationship. Any variation of this fundamental relationship is considered equivalent to the loss of reality and truth about God and man. Such a view of the God-man relationship is precisely the one which Freud attacked with such a savage accuracy.

<sup>3</sup> Mt 10, 1; Mk 3, 15; Lk 9, 1; 10, 19.    <sup>4</sup> 2 Cor 10, 8; 13, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Congar Y.: 'The Historical Development of Authority in the Church', in *On Problems of Authority* (London, 1962).

It is not an accurate description of christianity; and therefore Freud's view can be repudiated, provided the theology is also corrected.

There is no denying the transcendence of God in the sense of creation and man's dependence on God. There is no denying that the parent is the author of the life of the child. But God chose to enter into a relationship of love between himself and man. The parents enter into a relationship of love between themselves and their child. In both cases, growth is mediated through love; and its object is an independent, inner-directed, autonomous person who enters into a new relationship of equality with his genitors.

The adolescent enters into a new relationship with the parents, a relationship which does not deny his origin but which reflects an equality in love. The created person also enters into a relationship with God through baptism. This is a relationship which allows us to share in the life of Christ and, through him, to enter into the mysterious equality of relationship with the Father promised by Christ. The key to this transformation is love. Not condescending, but enabling, growth-promoting love, through which the Father wants to relate to each one of us as his adopted, mature, adult son in Christ, as St John describes it.<sup>6</sup> We have a relationship with the Father, in and through Christ, which is not one of helplessness, dependence, passivity or uselessness; for we share in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. We have a relationship of mature dependence with God which loses nothing of God's transcendentalism, but does not remove one iota, either, of his immanence in every christian.

The Church's task is precisely such a service, which encourages every ounce of spiritual growth, so that man individually and humanity collectively reflect more and more of the image of God: a mysterious reality of autonomy, self-acceptance, self-love and, as a result, total availability in love to others. The more each person realizes his potential, the more he achieves autonomy, self-acceptance, inner-directed purpose and meaning, and a love of self which is not a reflection of selfishness or egoism but a plenitude which is available to others in and through love. Such a concept of growth, personal or spiritual, owes nothing to the need to hold on to a 'significant other' for survival, as Freud postulated, but an identification with a significant other called God, who invites us to realize our potential and become like him, not in absolute power and authority, but in absolute love, which is his nature.

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<sup>6</sup> Jn 15, 15; 14, 20.