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Editorial

Authority

Authority is not an easy concept today. People both in the so-called developed and in the developing world are said to be discarding old authorities and searching for new, more satisfying, substitutes. In this climate, as Donald Shell shows below, even the most powerful country in the world has suffered 'a catastrophic decline in political authority.'

Though people are looking for an alternative authority, they often do not naturally expect to find it in the church, which still has an image of authoritarianism and is associated in the popular mind with the sort of authority patterns which tend to instruct rather than to explain, to command rather than to involve, and to anathematize rather than to understand. Yet many within the churches bemoan the lack of authority. Anglicans point to the minimizing of doctrinal authority over the last one hundred and fifty years. That this has taken place can scarcely be denied, and it has come about, on the one hand, as Anglicanism has sought to come to terms with the challenges of science and the historical-critical methodology; as it has attempted, at any rate in England, to continue to be the church of the nation; and as it has generally eschewed statements at odds with the climate of the times. It has come about, on the other hand, because the church has had within it rival groups claiming great authority for their perspectives and being prepared for the sake of their understanding of the Bible or mother church to withstand the expressed commands of ecclesiastical authority. So, for example, in the nineteenth century some evangelicals refused to comply with Bishop Blomfield's ruling about the wearing of surplices and so many Tractarians became increasingly forgetful of their erstwhile reverence for episcopal authority. 'Why', asked the *Church Times* of 1877 (then a paper very much associated with the Anglo-Catholic tradition) 'should a clergyman who yesterday was an unconsidered nobody . . . be treated as inspired because he has the "luck" to be selected for a mitre?' (quoted in Desmond Brown, *The Idea of the Victorian Church: A Study of the Church of England, 1833-1889.* McGill UP, Montreal 1968, p.126). Because those who believed in authority disputed about its source and interpretation, those in authority found it difficult to speak in a way which was generally persuasive and therefore carried authority. Thus those who sought to minimize the areas where the church spoke authoritatively found it easy to advance their cause.

That the church can still be thought to speak with overmuch

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authority when it in fact speaks with much less authority in matters of doctrine, may be because, as its confidence in the area of doctrine had receded, its structures of institutional authority have advanced. This has come in part because of the revived respect for the spiritual authority of the episcopal office, a respect which was particularly marked in colonial areas where the bishop did not have a clearly defined state role from which to derive his self-understanding, but which has grown, too, in England as the realities of episcopal temporal power have declined to the purely formal and symbolic; in part because of a general tendency to centralization and bureaucratization; and in part because of the very proper demand that the clergy and laity have a representative role in the decision-making processes of the church. In consequence, Anglicanism is institutionally less idiosyncratic and individualistic than it was one hundred and fifty years ago. Its enhanced ability to speak authoritatively has, however, sometimes appeared to be combined with reduced convictions about the authority and content of the Christian revelation. Authority in such circumstances can appear to be an irritant because it seems to speak to points of detail without being very clear about the authoritative principles which should underpin them. Donald Shell points to Carl Friedrich's definition of authority 'as the capacity to develop reasons for an action . . . in ways which intersect with the understanding of a community.' The traditional churches, at any rate in the West, have often failed in their recent history to display this sort of authority which commands attention precisely because it demonstrates reasoned conviction.

We have devoted four articles to this issue because it is of great importance. Amongst the many points that are made, it is perhaps worth remarking on four by way of general introduction. Firstly, the place of the authority of Scripture is a common theme, though it is conceded that interpretation is a matter of considerable complexity. Nonetheless, it occupies a unique place and, though Anglicanism has traditionally emphasized the role of tradition and reason alongside Scripture, they are not seen as equally valid sources. At the same time, Bishop Donald Cameron warns that Scripture does not contain explicit and certain patterns of developed ecclesiastical life, and those who have thought to discover such have been less than successful. Rather, surely, Scripture contains principles which should control the differing patterns which will inevitably arise in varied cultures and periods.

Secondly, the place of the laity in relation to authority is underlined. This is because authority relates ultimately to the whole church and not only to its ordained representatives. Thus Colin Buchanan emphasizes the awareness in the early church of the *consensus fidelium* as an ultimate barrier against any overreaching of the episcopal role. Thus, too, in a recent study Bishop Richard Hanson

concludes that in the primitive church authority 'did not reside in official ministers but in the church as a whole, all of whose members felt themselves under the authority of Christ.' (*Christian Priesthood Examined*, Lutterworth; Guildford 1979, p. 20) The increasing role of the laity in synods is one recognition of this; as is, at a local level, the discovery of the *charismata* of the body of Christ. The role of the whole people of God needs to be taken very seriously to prevent authority becoming frozen and distorted in institutional and traditional forms.

Thirdly, it is made clear that there is a dissimilarity between the nature of episcopacy in much of Anglicanism today and that of the early church where, as Dr Gerald Bray indicates, the bishop was much more like a 'team rector'. The point is not new but is often overlooked, and it is uncritically assumed that the bishop functions today more or less as he did in the early church. Of course, in many Anglican provinces he does no such thing, for they have been modelled in significant respects on the English diocese which is descended immediately from the medieval area bishopric where the bishop had a vast diocese, an elevated status and complex secular responsibilities. Bishop Hanson points out that, though the spiritual role of the bishop was redefined at the Reformation, his practical temporal functions continued much as before and thus 'the gulf between the bishop and the presbyter, between the diocesan and the parish priest . . . remained unbridged in the reformed Anglican tradition.' (ibid., p. 87) Even though the secular functions have fallen away, and the spiritual have become more practically possible, the sheer size of many dioceses makes the ideal of a shepherd of souls in close contact with each of his presbyters virtually impossible. Challenges to fairly drastic reform in this area, such as that made recently by Professor Anthony Hanson ('Overburdened Bishops', *Church Times*, 25 April 1980, p. 9), must be taken very seriously.

Fourthly, Donald Shell makes the crucially important distinction between authority which descends from office and that which arises out of knowledge and experience. John Goldingay, in another work, makes a similar distinction and goes on to argue that it is the latter form of authority, deriving 'its legitimacy from the contents of its statements or from its relationship with reality' (*Authority and Ministry*, Grove Books, Bramcote 1976, p. 8), which is the only form carrying credibility in the church of today (ibid., p. 21).

The church, it may be concluded, is expressing authority most meaningfully and most biblically when gift and office, service and word, action and explanation, minister and church most nearly coincide. It was already clear in the New Testament period that such authority could be expressed adequately in a variety of structures: in the charismatic spontaneity of the Corinthian ministry as well as in the more formal institutionalized ministerial patterns of the catholic

epistles. Its legitimacy depends, in other words, entirely on its relationship to its basic reality. Where it expresses the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, where it allows the involvement of the whole people of God, where it is controlled by Scripture, tradition and reason, rightly balanced, and where it is more concerned to serve than to dominate, then the most appropriate structures of authority are likely to emerge. Others will quite naturally be eschewed because they fail to express, in a way that is satisfactory to the church, the reality of a God who is the source and author of authority and who calls his church always to be authoritative but never to be authoritarian.

Local ordained ministry

The idea of a local ordained ministry has been around for some time. In 1972 the Bishops of Stepney and Woolwich made proposals which would have enabled the ordination of men in working-class areas without the barriers 'caused by the Church's reliance on current academic yardsticks and types of training' (*Local Ministry in Urban and Industrial Areas*, Mowbrays, London 1972, p. 9). More recently, with the rural ministry in mind, the diocese of Lincoln has proposed a scheme for a locally ordained ministry with locally based training and with a selection procedure which envisaged 'no formal reference to ACCM' (General Synod, ACCM, *Local Ordained Ministry*, GS 442, CIO, London 1980, p. 9). Neither ACCM nor the House of Bishops was enthusiastic, and the House of Bishops decreed substantial modifications. Candidates for such a ministry 'should attend a normal Bishops' Selection Conference at which a diocesan nominee should be allowed to speak to the local situation' and 'if the training provided is not within the context of one of the existing recognised courses, it should be by means of a scheme approved by ACCM with proper provision for external assessment.' (General Synod, House of Bishops, *Minutes*, HB(79)M4, p. 4) Whether these modifications are designed to involve sympathetically the whole church in the ministerial problems of local dioceses, or to thwart local initiatives, particularly at the crucial points of selection and training, remains to be seen. It will become obvious once it is evident whether the selection criteria and the scheme of training approved by ACCM are providing men, where necessary and in accordance with local needs and gifts, from a broader cultural, social and intellectual background than has been customary hitherto.

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