

The Psychological Roots of Authority¹

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Every Catholic knows that the Church is faced with a crisis and the name of that crisis is authority. Similarly in our society, the majority is aware that there is a challenge to authority as witnessed repeatedly on television which brings to millions of homes scenes of strife involving students, demonstrations, marches and clashes between employers, trade unions and workers. The majority of men and women sit and watch, leaving the few to march, sit down on the streets, barricade themselves in and from time to time explode in violence. At this point fingers are raised, critical editorials are written and sermons are preached about law and order. Indeed the desire for law and order is so great that human beings have to reach a very high degree of desperation before they threaten seriously the conditions which stabilize any society. Ideally everyone in authority should have as a primary concern the anticipation of legitimate needs. But this is an ideal and the enormous amount of human strife is a witness that this highly desirable objective is rarely achieved. Because of the known temptations likely to afflict those in authority who exercise power on behalf of others, the principles of democracy have been evolved to safeguard both the ruler and the ruled.

Democracy is a word that until recently has had a pejorative meaning within the Catholic Church. All authority is considered to come from above, from God, and does not require the consent or the approval of those governed. This view is still regularly served as the *pièce de résistance* when the debate about the nature of reform rages. It is of course an absolute misconception of the nature of authority. The relationship between God and his people is not one between governor and governed. It is absolutely true that in Christian cosmology we accept that God took the initiative in creating the world and man, even though the actual manner of its accomplishment is one of the secrets which man is now busy discovering. Discovering the origin of life will not of course diminish one iota the significance of God's initiative. God's plan for man and the world existed before time. It belonged to God as part of his eternal identity. The reason for this is a mystery to be reached and understood only eschatologically. But once the process was set in motion, as soon as life and man became a reality, we can no longer speak of creator and created, of ruler and subject, of authority and obedience, of above

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and below, because implicit in the design, in the very nature of God there is a developing relationship conceived in eternity, manifested in time and to be fulfilled in eternity. Relationship between God and man means involvement between persons, it is dynamic and depends on free interaction.

In the Judaeo-Christian tradition we know that the relationship between man and God is one primarily of love in which God seeks man's perfection and fulfilment. God's seeking requires man's response and in this sense man is as necessary to God as God is to man. In a mutuality of exchange governed by the principle of love the exact role of authority must be clarified. Authority conceived in authoritarian terms emphasizes the giver's independence from the receiver, the ruler's from the subject, and this has always been considered a prominent feature in a theology which has stressed God's omnipotence, his completion without man and the need to see creation as an outright gift. All this makes perfect sense in terms of vertical, hierarchical structures in which there is an order of giving from above downwards and one of receiving which admits only of gratitude, passivity and submission to the giver. Such a relationship is, in the language of Buber, one of I to it, not of I to Thou, and it is certainly not the language of the scriptures which conceives of authority as service. 'You know that among the pagans the rulers lord it over them and their great men make their authority felt. This is not to happen among you. No; anyone who wants to be great among you must be your servant, and anyone who wants to be first among you must be your slave, just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as ransom for many.' (Matthew 20, 25-28.)

If the key to authority is service then it is certainly service in love and once again the scriptures give us some key criteria for love. St John's writings illustrate one essential point clearly and precisely. There cannot be love in the presence of fear: 'In love there can be no fear, but fear is driven out by perfect love, because to fear is to expect punishment, and anyone who is afraid is still imperfect in love.' (1 John 4, 18.)

Another feature of love is the necessity for freedom, an issue much in discussion at the present moment and illustrated by the story of the rich young man in the gospel of St Matthew. The obvious lesson in this episode is the deterrent effect of the young man's riches but of equal importance is our Lord's attitude on this occasion. He is asked how eternal life can be achieved. He answers by stating the minimum requirements, the commandments. 'I have kept all these. What more do I need to do?' The answer was to sell everything and follow Christ. But the young man was not ready and his sadness betrayed his conflict. Beyond the commentary on richness and poverty what follows is significant. Christ does not upbraid the young man, there is no condemnation, no attempt at coercion, no

moral blackmail and no threats. The young man asked freely and received an invitation to love perfectly. He was not ready to respond fully to this. God waits upon man and his eternal patience carries the stamp of the authenticity of Divine love.

Authority thus far has been described in terms of service mediating love under conditions of freedom and absence of fear. But for what purpose? The purpose with which we are most familiar is the preservation of law and order and, when these are threatened, the use of force to restore them. Sometimes force is necessary but its use is very frequently an admission of failure at home, in school, in society, nationally and internationally. Even when peace and order have been obtained and maintained this is not the end of the affair, for these conditions exist for a vital reason, the promotion of growth. The Church's task is to promote growth in Christ: 'If we live by the truth and in love, we shall grow in all ways into Christ, who is the head by whom the whole body is fitted and joined together, every joint adding its own strength, for each separate part to work according to function. So the body grows until it has built itself up, in love.' (Ephesians 4, 15-16.)

Some have seen the present crisis of authority as a straightforward refusal to accept competent authority and they label this behaviour as erroneous, wilful and irresponsible, needing ruthless correction. Others have interpreted it as part of a dangerous fascination with new ideas which endanger the faith by rejecting the familiar, the traditional and the sources of inspiration of the past. Still others see little else in it but chaos demanding immediate restoration of order and discipline. There is just enough truth in each of these positions to make their utterances worthy of attention in individual instances.

In my opinion they all miss the essence of the clamour for change. This springs from an awareness varying from a deep conviction to a mere glimmer of insight that the Church's authority has been far more concerned with order than with growth, with organization than with service, with coercion than freedom, with law rather than love.

It is not accidental that we call the Church Mother and designate priests and nuns, brothers and sisters with such terms as Father, Mother, Sister and Brother. All these terms convey the notion that within the arms of the Church will be found the nourishing sources of development. The revolt against authority is a collective expression of mass deprivation. The Church is no longer experienced as a good parent and I would now like to examine the roots of this discontent by reference to the family, the growth of the child and its relationship to the parents.

The role of the parent is to ensure that the right conditions will exist from the very start to promote the maximum possible growth of the child. Growth involves physical, intellectual, psychological,

social and spiritual maturation of which physical growth can look after itself, with the minimum of trouble provided adequate nutrition is available and health is not impaired by the more crippling diseases that attack children in infancy and childhood. Intellectual growth involves a mastery of the subjects currently taught in our schools based on the acquisition of the three Rs and their various extension. Psychological, social and spiritual maturation are intimately connected with the child's growing awareness of itself as a differentiated self that has to relate to itself, others and God.

All growth is an interaction between the child's inherited potential and the environment's capacity to respond to its growing needs appropriately. These needs vary from age to age and all that we have learned from child psychology has taught us that the early years are vital. During this period there is the most rapid development needing the most responsive environment. This environment which is made up of parents, parent surrogates, other members of the family, teachers and finally all those who come into contact with the child will be limited by certain factors. The first is a social one depending on the socio-economic resources of the parents. There is plenty of evidence indicating the adverse impact of certain low socio-economic groups on health and educational achievements. The second is the social climate of the period which dictates attitudes, values and orientations. In addition to the overall atmosphere there are always significant differences found in different social classes. The third and probably the most important enhancing or restricting element is the personality of the parent. The child has no choice in this matter. It depends utterly on the parental capacities to nourish, sustain and educate it through all the early critical years until it reaches a sufficient stage of development to become master or mistress of its own destiny. Since humans have the longest period of dependent growth amongst the mammalian kingdom, parental responsibility is unique and often handicapped not by lack of goodwill but by the all too common frailty of human limitations. The growth of the personality goes through certain well-recognized stages first described by Freud and later on elaborated by others. All that these phases indicate is the emergence of certain key features which cumulatively shape the rich potential of the adult person. As in the case of physical growth, what is needed is a suitably matching response on the part of the parents to each new phase of development.

The first phase roughly covers the first year and it was designated by Freud as the oral phase for the obvious reason that the mouth was the central source of experience. After many years of clinical observation Freud formulated a view of personality which depended on vicissitudes of two instincts, sexuality and aggression. Very few would now agree on such a restricted basis of personality development. Freud, however, insisted throughout his extensive studies on

a psychological interpretation of biological phenomena. The mouth, the anus and the genitalia were the three erotic zones which bombarded the child with pleasurable stimuli of a sexual nature and the handling of this sexual energy in relationship to mother and father was considered to provide the crucial basis for mature development.

It is not necessary to accept in detail Freudian theory to see that feeding allows a whole range of contact and exchange between mother and child. Closeness, handling, warmth, satiation of hunger, smiling, playing accompanying feeding are the earliest experiences of the baby apart from sleep. What is essential for its survival is a reliable and trustworthy service at this stage and many of the successors of Freud who have moved away from his strictly psychosexual theories have stressed the infant's anxiety and need for security in this early helpless state. One of them, Erikson, whose schema is very useful to follow, considers that in this first year a basic sense of trust is developed which underlies the future of all faith. He points out in his writings that the development of a particular trait at a particular stage does not mean that the child can preserve this acquisition in later years without continuing reinforcement. Everything that is gained can be lost, but if the possibility is not available when the potential for acquisition is at its maximum there is always the danger that later learning may be incomplete or severely damaged leaving a scar in the character.

Thus the first year demands reliable parents whose authority lies entirely in availability. Furthermore, this availability has to shape itself to the unique requirements of the individual child. No two children will feed, smile, want to be held or played with in exactly the same way and the mother who is attentive, relaxed and has the time will learn how to fit in with the needs of her baby in a way that its requirements will be met uniquely and fully.

Much can go wrong at this stage. The infant may be unwanted, it may be the wrong sex, its needs well in excess of what the mother can provide. Rejection may take subtle forms but whatever its nature the year of basic trust can slip by without this trait being experienced, laying the foundations for mistrust. Partial or complete rejection is not the only way of inculcating mistrust. The mother's over-anxiety may be communicated in the way she handles, touches, looks and speaks to her child. But for the vast majority of infants these obstacles do not exist and gradually towards the end of the third quarter of the first year the child begins to feel its own separate self, to feel a 'me' and a 'not me'. The 'other' is mother whose presence is hailed by excitement and smiles and her departure dreaded and accompanied by screams and tears.

The second year ushers in an alarming acquisition of new skills which continue in the third year. The child now crawls, takes its first tentative steps, and soon the mother needs a radar screen covering every room to prevent disaster in time. As mobility is

acquired so is the ability to hold and to release, to retain and to throw away, to hide and to discover over and over again. These characteristics Freud chose to focus on the child's gradual acquisition of mastery over elimination and he called it the anal phase. Control of bowel and bladder may have no other significance than the clearing up of mess, but for the child this is a phase of acquisition of control over its own body, producing an end result. This is a product of its internal world capable of evoking daily approval from mother. Here is a sure and recurring means of discovering one's power and the ability to please the most precious person in the world. But mother can be not only pleased but displeased, and the second threat to personal growth can now take place if bowel training follows a rigid pattern laid down and insisted on by the mother for whom cleanliness, order and tidiness are all important. Coercion is easy at this stage and the child may adapt to mother's requirements in order to please her. This is the beginning of what Winnicott calls the false self, or the acquisition of characteristics designed to please the parents rather than respect the integrity of the emerging self.

The false self can arise in many other situations. Feeding, dressing, bath and play time, as every mother knows, are all exhausting transactions whenever there is an unceasing battle of wills. The child is now rapidly acquiring freedom of effectiveness depending less on mother but still needing a great deal of her. It is a phase of autonomy and the first encounter with authority capable of frustration and prohibition or facilitation. These are the years which will bring the first sounds of a recurrent refrain as the sound of 'Don't' reverberates, first externally and then internally, providing the first elements of conscience. But the 'don'ts' can respect the individuality of the child protecting it from danger while encouraging the emergence of enquiry, discovery and self-expression. The degree to which this will be allowed will depend on the social customs of the day, the personal experiences of the mother and her own capacity to cope with the overabundance of these years. If her ability to cope with noise, fuss, mess, overactivity is limited, her authority will be used to restrict these exhibitions of autonomy. If she has a low threshold to irritability and limited patience, the child's attempts to feed, dress and take care of itself will be cut short as she takes over. Outwardly there will develop a neat, tidy, conforming toddler, inwardly there is a false adaptation learning to please mother's moods. Authority will have its first triumph, order. The cost will be loss of spontaneous acquisition of skills.

In a sense this is the way the Catholic Church has behaved. The centralization of authority exercised as a controlling and organizing force in Rome has demanded, above all, order in thought and practice in the past and is currently tending to be impatient with the inevitably painful and at times inadequate attempts at formulating

new ideas and practices. Growth is bound to have trial and error characteristics and if every error is blown up into a heresy then real growth will never take place.

Authority, however, may not succeed so easily. Instead, stubbornness and rebellion ensue with the inevitable fights, slaps, shaming and punishing aftermaths. Autonomy is an opportunity to gain self-control without loss of self-esteem and this is the result of a successful conclusion of this phase. If this fails shame may become an increasingly prominent feature or the opposite may set in, a defiance of authority with an 'I don't care' attitude.

The frustration of this phase engenders manifestations of anger, both the mother's and the child's. But for some years to come the battle is hopelessly unequal. Authority is bound to win not only on the basis of brute force but because of the simple fact that the child needs mother's approval far more than the other way round. So authority is placated, the manifestations of anger are circumscribed and if necessary driven inwardly to the part we call the real self, waiting until the day comes when the balance of power will alter. This will be adolescence or even later on and in a sense the present outbursts of the laity in the Church could be described as its adolescence. They are manifestations of repressed anger against a repressing mother.

In referring to adolescence we are anticipating somewhat for we are chronologically at or about the fourth year and these three years round about the fifth year see a further rapid expansion of enquiry, discovery and a particular form of self-expression which Erikson calls the phase of initiation characterized by intrusion—the intrusion into other bodies by physical attack, the intrusion into other people's ears and minds by aggressive talking, the intrusion into space by vigorous locomotion, the intrusion into the unknown by consummate curiosity.

If the phase of autonomy was a testing time for mother, these two or three years can be a cross for both parents mitigated for some families by the nursery school. This phase of expansion will be met by the social expectations of the particular milieu in which the child is growing up. In one setting he or she will be allowed to roam all over the house, next door, in the backyard and the street with little restraint, allowed to feel the whole range of the exciting venture of being a five-year-old. A similar freedom can be found in more demanding households in which manners and behaviours are more exacting but not too restricting, and finally there will be the homes to be found in all social classes which place distinct embargoes on this undisciplined exploration.

Far more important than the social restrictions from now onwards will be the personal limits of the parents governed by their own anxieties. If the mother anticipates a fatal accident every time the child crosses the road, swings from trees, or sees him maimed for

life at every somersault in the air or feels every bang, noise, scream and yell as her own personal destruction, then these activities will be reduced, now no longer for the child's well-being but for her own survival. If the child violates the rules laid down, the rationalizations regarding his welfare, need for discipline and self-control will be trotted out. If these warnings are accompanied by enough anger and threats, they will be believed and complied with and another nail will be fixed in the coffin of the real self. There will probably be more order and discipline, tidiness, more external compliance but another critical phase will slip by without the acquisition of the competence, imagination and activity belonging to manipulation and exploration. Instead guilt feelings will now be added to shame.

Guilt is the word that links the phase of initiative with Freud's phallic and oedipal phase. After the oral and anal phase Freud postulated the child's growing awareness of its genitalia, the boy his penis and the girl her vagina. Intrusion, which Erikson expanded into many other activities, was for the libido theory the secret desire of the boy to possess mother sexually and to remove the father, and vice versa for the girl. This is the famous oedipal situation bringing into force the concept of sexual guilt and competition. In the libido theory guilt not only ensues from these forbidden libidinal desires but in addition from the development of the superego. The superego is the child's collective awareness of parental prohibitions which now become part of its own unconscious governing principle—in short, its conscience. If these demands are too restrictive, reflecting more the needs of parents than those of the child, then the chances diminish still further that the growing personality will be fostered according to the dictates of its own growing requirements. In this way the false self grows and the real self remains stunted.

This process continues in the phase characterized by the school years which see the child's industry developing in intellectual and social terms while its body is steadily moving towards puberty and adolescence.

Everyone knows that adolescence is a time of rebellion. It is the ultimate conclusion of the detachment of self from the parents into a separate identity which can leave home, acquire a job and/or profession and handle successfully heterosexual relations. It is a period actuated by the need to prove one's capacity to survive as a separate entity. How speedily and successfully this phase will be negotiated will depend a great deal on what the young man or woman has acquired cumulatively within himself or herself. Mature independence depends on the presence and easy access of all the distinctive acquisitions of the previous fifteen to twenty years which will now be used to form new relationships ultimately leading to marriage. In the absence of the essential emotional growth there is excessive dependence which still needs figures of authority to lean on long after they are chronologically unnecessary. Instead of the

parents providing an umbrella for tender protective care to augment growth, they become a crutch which cannot be abandoned. In so far as the Catholic Church has acted as a crutch and only a crutch to her children, she has served them badly and I believe that a good deal of her structure and motivation has been precisely this. But a crutch is needed for a broken leg and the people of God no longer desire to relate to him as casualties in an orthopaedic ward.

The spiritual casualties of the last four hundred years want the freedom to grow, and part of the present unrest inside the Church is due to an intense desire to remove the false self, the blinkers of accumulated neglect, however well-meaning the caring has been hitherto. I write 'well-meaning' because neither parents nor the Church have deliberately tried to stunt their children. They did their best but the best was not good enough and in many a home throughout the world children are telling their parents of their limitations just as many Catholics are telling the Church of its limitations. This is painful but it should be most welcome if it leads to a greater realization of potential. It is difficult not only because it hurts the pride of the older generation, not only because it is not pleasant to be proved wrong and incapable, but most of all because it is anxiety provoking. All change is anxiety provoking and the authority that can change least, which appears most conservative or recalcitrant, be it parent, teacher, priest or bishop, is the one that on closer examination can stand least the anxiety and insecurity of change. This is probably one of the most crucial factors that is currently delaying the implementation of the vision of Vatican II. It can only be of course a delay. The work of the Holy Spirit cannot be frustrated, it can only be postponed.

The work of the Spirit is the progressive actualization of the fulness of man created in the image of God discovering himself through time. Never before has there been such a rapid explosion of self-knowledge in humanity and rarely a greater need for authority to act as a guardian and promoter of the richness in man, physically, intellectually, socially and spiritually. Contemporary man yearns for a sign that will make his newly-discovered self an acceptable gift to God the Father. If the sign is not mediated by the Church, man will by-pass it as a formal organ and seek his own direct and personal contact. The evidence is overwhelming that this is precisely what is happening in all denominations.

God waits for man to reciprocate the potential given to him and the Church's task must be to make this possible. The sources of all growth lie in the family and continue in the Church. In both situations authority must act as a service in which trust becomes the foundation of faith; this faith is nourished by autonomy, initiative and industry which give access to hope, and completed in an accepting self-realization, the basis of love—love of self, of neighbour and of God.