

Power, Feathers, and Robes

From the Gospels, we learn that Jesus is authentic, open, and compassionate (e.g. Matt 9:18-26). As such, his personal authority emerges from the gospel stories. Significantly, this is the authority of charisma, conviction, and compassion. It is rings true. Moreover, he empowers others. That is, his ministry is a ministry of empowerment. In fact, the root of the word *authority* is related to both *authoring* and *inaugurating*. Jesus is then the author of a new movement. He inaugurates new practices. This is the basis of our ministry in Christ for others.

In contrast, the modern institutional Church is constantly tempted to revert to practices of *power over others*, and not *power to or for others*. So, instead of cultivating a passion for life, this church propagates seeds of fear. Of course, the misuse of power is also a secular problem. For example, look at the bullying and harassment experiences of women in a range of professions. Clearly, the Church is not the only institution with power problems, but it is called to embody a viable alternative (Gal 3:28).

The aim of this article is two-fold: it is to present a thumbnail sketch of the problems associated with power and, as a contrast, affirm an Anglican understanding of authority. As such, the sketch raises questions, and invites wider reflection.

As an institution, the Church has a problem with power. As such, the problem of power is the elephant in the sitting room. Ironically, we rarely use the word *power* in relation to our beloved institution. Moreover, Anglicans have said little about power and its relationship to authority. Of course, Stephen Platten's *Augustine's Legacy* (1997) signalled some of the problems, Stephen Syke's *Power and Christian Theology* (2006) provided a useful survey, and Carter Heyward's approach to authority in *Saving Jesus* (1999) is refreshing. Overall, however, there is little critical reflection on the concept and practice of power in Anglicanism. But the problem will not go away.

In politics, for example, the abuse of power relies on secrecy. It surfaces in the unrestricted use of veto powers and privileges, that is, the unqualified right to have the final say (even if you are wrong). This is power *over* not power *for* others. As a systemic problem, then, power-relations are complex and multilayered. To this end, I have been investigating both the problem of power *and* the call to create churches of mutual empowerment. I have a book coming out shortly entitled *The Church, Authority, and Foucault: Imagining the Church as an Open Space of Freedom* (Routledge, 2017), which looks at these problems in detail. But let me raise some of the challenges.

The misuse of power is often unwitting and implemented with the best of intentions. It also relies on the complicity of others. In other words, dubious, even exploitive actions are not always challenged. Complicity then stems, in part, from what Judith Butler describes as, "sovereign fantasies". In other words, kings need kingmakers. As political scientist Wendy Brown argues, democracy is suffering because we are frightened of freedom, that is, almost universally, we want someone else to fix things for us. So how do we change the system?

We need to step back and analyse what we say and do. Even liturgy, for example, has implications for human relations. From thrones to enthronement ceremonies and the order of procession, power and its trappings are seductive, especially when the trappings are sanctified. As philosopher Michel Foucault observes, "The distribution according to ranks or grade has a double role: it marks the gaps, hierarchizes qualities, skills and aptitudes; but it also punishes and rewards". In other words, liturgical gestures have implications for power-relations. All this is what theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether refers to as, "The feathers and robes of males display their power and authority in ceremonial situations". So, why is it important to conduct this kind of analysis?

By naming problems of power, we find creative ways of renewing the Church for our life and our mission in the twenty-first century. So, let's return to the figure of Jesus. In the words of Carter Heyward, "As a more liberating and compassionate response to the serious, complex moral quandaries and questions of our life together, I interpret the Passion of Jesus as the basis of how he lived in the context of similar quandaries and questions. He lived passionately. By that, I mean that he lived a fully human life – really present, deeply rooted in God, able to be there with and for others,

friend and stranger alike. He was able to *be in the questions, share the quandaries*, not put himself outside or above others”.

Inspired by the example of Jesus, early churches evolved as *open spaces* of freedom. In fact, this idea of church is linked to the meaning of the word *ekklesia*, which is an open inclusive space. In this space, we are all called by our baptism in Christ to work for the sake of others. In the process, we are equipped for the building up of the Church. In such a Church, however, authority is not the same as power. Moreover, Anglicanism has an important contribution to make on the question of authority.

In our tradition, authority entails a mutual relation between leaders and followers. In other words, the authority of leaders is grounded in the life of the people. Theologically, our bishop’s authority has a vertical (diachronic) dimension, which is embodied in and expressed by the concept of *apostolic succession*. Authority also has a horizontal (synchronic) dimension, which is embodied in and expressed by the *consent* of the people of God. What’s more, our practice of *Bishop-in-Synod* is an attempt to model and express the dual nature of ecclesial authority. As such, this is shared or dispersed authority. In this light, we have something to offer, but it begins with a transparent assessment of our power-relations.

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