

Authority

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SOME years ago, His Holiness the late Pope Benedict declared that there are five plagues afflicting humanity at the present time. Four of them are: first, an abnormal aversion to work, second, an unprecedented hatred between man and man, third, an excessive thirst for pleasure as the great aim of life, and fourth a gross materialism which denies the reality of the spiritual in human life. Then comes the fifth with which this article is concerned — “the unprecedented challenge to authority”.

Now what does His Holiness mean by the word “authority” ? Does he mean authority which does not permit itself to be challenged, or which there are no means of challenging? Or does he mean authority which is unchallengeable because it is demonstrably authoritative, because its sources are visible to, though not necessarily appreciable by, the average intelligence? Presumably he was referring mainly to the former type of authority, and in any case to authority without, not to authority within. He was probably referring to authority which must not be challenged because some person or body of persons declares that it must not be [Page 2] challenged. In other words, he was referring to an authority which must be regarded as such because it is declared to be such by another authority, the latter either being self-constituted or itself depending upon yet another authority; so that of authority there is no end. In fact, authority thus becomes a circle which many people might regard as not a little vicious.

But why should authority not be challenged ? Why should not authority continually be challenged as to its truth for us, and no less as to its respect and reverence for us? Is there anything we ought not to be constantly challenging so as continually to be sure that we are alive to it and that it is alive to us? If anyone say that it is not reverent to challenge this or that, are we necessarily bound by his declaration, by his judgment ? Is his judgment sacrosanct, infallible ? On what authority is it so sacrosanct or infallible? What can be sacrosanct save that which is true for us, real for us, sublime for us? Even this cannot, in the nature of things, be infallible? Only infallibility can gauge infallibility. Only the whole can know the whole; and is there a whole to know? That which is sacrosanct today may not be sacrosanct tomorrow, at all events so far as we are concerned, though no doubt all is sacrosanct from the larger standpoint. In any case, that which we are challenging is not Truth Absolute, whatever this may be, for we can know nothing [Page 3] about Truth Absolute. In all cases we are challenging our understanding of Truth. We are challenging conception, belief, tradition, convention, attitude, whether our own or those of others. We are challenging the masks of Reality, whether masks made by ourselves or made by others. And unless we do so challenge we shall never penetrate into that which the masks veil, we shall never pass from the outer court into the inner sanctuary.

Unprecedented challenge to authority is surely right. What authority can be above challenge ? God ? But He stands revealed to us, in so far as we may think we know what we mean by the word “God”, only in interpretation from below, not in revelation from above. Where we have “God said” we have in fact but a translation, an impression, a stepping down: and these from sources it would be enormously difficult both

to define and to trace. We do not challenge God, but it is as reverent as it is necessary to challenge our understanding of God, to challenge the word itself and all its implications for their precise significance to us. It is sometimes regarded as blasphemous to reject God, to be able to attach no meaning to the word. But because we set up an image and worship it, are those who do not worship our image guilty of blasphemy? At best we possess but a poor and distorted image of God, be our conception of this word what it may. There is only one real blasphemy, and that is the blasphemy [Page 4] against Life, which is to live untruly to oneself. But to live out of accord with the image of another is surely not blasphemy, any more than it is blasphemy to disagree with someone. It is not well to be disrespectful to the images of others, but we have the right and the duty to worship where we will.

Is any teaching to be above challenge? Teaching, too, must needs be an interpretation from below, however much it may also be a revelation from above. The Absolute tempers the wind of its absoluteness to the relative, which must needs be shorn of its absoluteness. In other words, from the excess of the Glory of Truth our youthful and therefore ignorant eyes are veiled. We know but in part, and the utmost we know at any time must needs be but a fragment of that which is knowable. Hence, that the relative may grow in absoluteness, that our eyes may grow strong, that the part may grow towards the whole, challenge — which is change — is imperative, lest we imagine the part to be the whole, and ourselves to be full-grown. All teaching, by very reason of its being teaching, involves limitation; and hence must be challenged, though for a time it may usefully be taken as a working hypothesis, as an interpretation which must be tested by realization.

A Person? The same is true of Persons. Most teachers are infinitely greater than their messages or teachings. All teachers must needs veil their [Page 5] Light from the weakness of their pupils' eyes. If we would know our teacher we must challenge — not the teacher, but our understanding of him. Who are we to challenge the teacher? If at any time he have helped us towards the Truth, our gratitude must be eternal. And may it not be that when we doubt him we are not understanding him? May it not sometimes be that when we decide to leave him we are leaving one of whom we still have need? But if we have other lessons to learn which are not his to teach then may we have to enter other class-rooms and sit at the feet of other teachers, not forgetting him, but for the time learning elsewhere, and able to learn elsewhere partly because of him. We need not waste time in challenging teachers, but we do well to consider the applicability of their teachings to ourselves. This is right challenge.

A Church? What is a Church but a repository? However Churches may have been instituted, and whatever may have been reposed in them as instituted, they grow to be man-maintained, and to receive from man additions to and modifications of the original contents, until, it may be, these original contents are almost if not entirely lost in that which has accrued afterwards. And where there is alleged revelation from above we are bound in reverence to challenge the accuracy of its presentation below. The greatest reverence to the Christ is to strive to discover what really is the [Page 6] nature of His Light, and not to be content with its appearance after passing through the coloured glass of some hearer or of some recorder of hear-say. No doubt this has its value, but it has a definitely challengeable value. We see through a glass *darkly*. We must learn to see face to face, and to this end we must needs challenge, change.

In all such challenge, let it be repeated, we are not challenging Truth. We are not challenging actualities, whatever these may be. We are challenging the Light as it appears to us after passing through the distorting and darkening media of the outer worlds. Who are we to challenge Truth? Who are we to challenge God? Who are we to challenge the Bringers of Light to the world? Who are we to challenge

any person as to himself? Who are we to challenge any teaching as to its actual verity? Who are we to challenge persons and teachings, churches and faiths, as to their value to others? But we have the duty, out of very reverence for these persons and teachings. these churches and faiths, these treasured conceptions of Life, and no less out of very reverence for ourselves, to challenge our own judgment of them, our own pictures of them, our own relations to them, our own understanding of them. We must challenge their truth to us, for Life abhors mockery, hypocrisy and blindness, as it abhors a vacuum, which indeed these are. Inasmuch as Truth is in part understanding, true reverence [Page 7] must also be understanding. And the process of challenge is the process of taking constant stock of the contents of ourselves, that we may be sure we are living increasingly in the depths of Life from out the shallows, that we are increasingly moving away from those which are for us the greater darknesses into the lesser, from dawns into days.

Surely, too, may we challenge authority as to its respect, nay as to its reverence, for us and for what we are. Authority which forbids search, and demands unseeing compliance with its assertions, and would enforce such autocracy by recourse to fear, is, to say the very least, a dangerous authority, and should be to many an authority all the more challengeable, by reason of the means it adopts to secure unchallengeable sway and dominion. Indeed, it may well be doubted if such "authority" is true authority for the majority, even if it be so for a few, if it be authority at all in the true sense of the word, as we shall see when we proceed to a definition.

Is not reverence, a sense of the more, a major quality of Truth? Whatever else may be in Truth such as we know Truth in these outer regions of Light veiled, it must at least convey to us the sense of "moreness". the sense of majesties and splendours beyond our ken. Truth may satisfy and cause to rejoice. But Truth also calls to depths and distances by the very fact of this inherent [Page 8] quality of reverence. True authority must, therefore, be reverent, and we have the duty towards ourselves to challenge it as to its power so to call us. It may be true authority and yet not call us. Then is it not true authority for us, though it may well be such for others. True authority must be reverent of ourselves, ever seeking to aid us to discover ourselves, to live in our own freedom and in our own powers and purposes, as these unfold themselves to us. God made man to be immortal and made him to be an image of His own eternity, nothing short of this, nothing less than this; not an image of an aspect in time, but an image of eternity. To such an end, how great a need for reverence in all things, to all things, in all relationships. For what is reverence but the very sense of eternity in the midst of time. To this must true authority call us. To this must we call ourselves.

Now let us consider what authority really is. Literally, that which increases. Literally and truly, that which does not increase, cause to grow, is not authority, even though it be called authority. The essence of authority is thus its fructifying power. Authority is a fructifying agent. And the acid test of its genuineness, of its reality, is its power to cause increase, to cause to grow, to fructify. Its nature is of less importance than its fruits. That which in some causes increase, growth, may have the reverse effect in others, or at least may have no such effect [Page 9] at all. That which is literally authority to some may be the reverse of authority to others. But true authority, reliable authority, dependable authority, is the power which fructifies. Hence, one man's authority may well be another man's destruction. Authority is relative and not absolute.

Let us now see whence authority is derived. In the first place, since etymologically authority is a force which causes to increase, which causes growth, it must be omnipresent, since growth is universal.

Authority, therefore, must be an aspect of Life. But, as authority, it must necessarily be a specialized aspect of Life. Authority is Life viewed in a certain light. Authority, by its very etymological nature, must be Life objectivized. Authority must be a vision of growth, and if it be true authority must cause growth. It must have these two characteristics, not absolutely, of course — no authority can, within the terms of our existence, be absolute — but relatively; relatively, that is, to an individual.

Authority is inconceivable without individuality, just as the idea of subject necessarily involves the idea of object. Authority is objective, and individuality is subjective. Authority, if true, is a vision of a larger individuality. It is a larger individuality objectivized. It is the less gazing upon the more. It is the less remembering the more. It is the less recognizing and reaching out towards the more. Such is the function of [Page 10] true authority, that is to say of authority which fulfils itself.

But it is not to this kind of authority that in all probability His Holiness refers when he deprecates “the unprecedented challenge to authority”. He is concerned with a very subtle form of authority, which perhaps ought not to be called authority at all, an authority which ought to be accepted because it actually does that which those who are to be subjected to it may not know that it does. He is probably thinking of his Church and of its fundamental dogmas and teachings, of that which is essential to membership of his Church. Such - and - such doctrines cause growth, even though the individual may be insensible of growing by reason of them. Therefore they should be believed. Which is to say that there must be harmonious accord between the individual and the teaching, or, shall we say, the truth.

So far, perhaps, so good. If there be such harmonious accord, then the authority is true, at all events for the individual, for it causes him to grow, or, if we must be meticulously accurate, it causes him to feel that he is growing to feel that he is increasing. Let us hope that when an individual is conscious of growth he is actually growing. But there is a difficulty which involves great danger. The Church and its doctrines must be believed. They are the only authority, because they are the only means of [Page 11] growth — of grace, the words mean the same thing. If they are not believed there is no growth. There is no growth outside them. They *are* growth. If there be not harmonious accord with them, then the individual is not growing, and he who is not growing is dying, is to all intents and purposes dead. Here we have authority of the most dangerous kind, first because it arrogates to itself omniscience, second because, in proportion to its strength, it may create fear and hypocrisy. On what basis does it arrogate to itself omniscience? On the basis of man-made standards. We must believe because we are hearing the voice of God. Who says we are hearing the voice of God? People like ourselves, men like ourselves. We are thus not in fact relying on God but on human beings more or less like ourselves, and upon distinctly human interpretation of certain events and circumstances which may be superhuman, but which we gaze upon through human agencies. Even if we could recognize the voice of God, be our definition of the word “God” what we will, we have yet *ourselves* to hear it declare that such and such teachings and doctrines are expression of the Life of God. And even if they are, we have yet *ourselves* to learn that realization of them is salvation, and non-realization of them damnation. We may be told these things through intermediaries, interpreters, who may call themselves God-appointed though we must be at [Page 12] liberty to call them self-appointed; but who has seen them face to face with God?

This is surely not true authority, but tyranny and coercion masquerading as authority. Not necessarily maleficent tyranny. Probably not. In the case of the Church, surely not. No doubt it is benevolent tyranny. But can it be true authority, save as regards those in whom it causes increase and growth? For the rest it cannot be authority, not even for those who give it lip-acceptance. Authority, to be authority, must have at

least heart acceptance, and in due time head acceptance too. Authority is life. Save as it evokes *life* it does not cause to grow. From mere words, from mere forms, empty of life, it shrinks away and is not. No one truly believes who does not *know* in his heart. True authority generates heart-knowledge, even though it may not be able to generate head-knowledge. We may know without knowing how we know. Some day we shall know *how*. But to know is of infinitely greater importance than to know how. Wisdom is born in the heart and dwells in the heart. It takes shape in the mind. That it should be born, and dwell, matters infinitely more than that it should take this or that shape. Time shall give it shape, but a Power far greater than Time is needed to give it birth. True authority causes us to become aware of more of ourselves, or, if you will, more aware of ourselves. [Page 13] True authority causes us to become more alive. True authority gives us joy and peace and will and wisdom and discontent. By these tests we may distinguish between true authority and that which masquerades as such, that which in fact enslaves though it may appear to free. Be it remembered, however, that the same authority which is one man's meat may be another man's poison. Again let it be repeated: Authority is not, and cannot be, absolute. It is relative to the individual. Hence that which to us is masquerade may be to others truth. Hence that which to us may be tyranny and coercion may to others be true authority, causing increase and growth. Let us judge for ourselves, but beware of judging for others. What we have to be sure about is that we are *growing*. We must be immensely true with ourselves in this regard. We must be sure. We must *know* we are growing. Then is our authority meat. Otherwise it is poison masquerading as meat, so far as we are concerned.

Let it now be said that no one can do without authority, and if Pope Benedict be deploring the non-recognition of this fact, then we are in hearty agreement with him. But if there be today an unprecedented challenge to authority, is it not in reality a challenge to any stopping short at the initial processes of authority? Authority induces vision, vision of splendid things, of splendid hope, of wondrous possibilities. But authority itself does [Page 14] far more than this. This is only the beginning of the work of authority. And today we are saying that vision is not enough. Today we are saying that to gaze is not enough. Today we are saying that vision, gazing, must be followed up by movement, by achievement, by experience. This is what Dean Inge presumably means when he tells us that in this age of ours we are moving from authority to experience. At all events this would seem to be what he ought to mean. Until now religion has been largely a matter of vision, largely a matter of the vision-half of authority, of the gazing-half of authority, oblivious, neglectful of the experience-half, ignoring that movement towards the object of vision which is the fulfilment of authority, of true authority. Authority has failed save as the individual achieves. Authority has failed save as the individual becomes. Authority has failed save as the individual has a sense of achieving, of becoming, so that authority, working in him, causes him to sense an increase in stature, in power, in wisdom, in understanding.

Authority is everywhere, for authority is the intimation of the larger life, and where is such intimation absent save to the eyes of those to whom it is visible only in specific form. Authority is everywhere. Authority is in tree, in grass, in flower, in rock, in sea, in river, in every creature, human and subhuman, in the very air, in fire, in [Page 15] earth, in sky. Authority is everywhere because everywhere is there the intimation of the larger life which waits upon our entry into it. Authority is in ourselves no less than without. We need not to go without for our authority. We need not to go to persons. We need not to go to things. Within ourselves shall we find all the authority we need. Perhaps we must become our own authorities. Yet authority without may arouse the authority within — the God without knocking upon the doorway of the home of the God within. And when we truly become our own authorities, then shall we recognize all authority, whether within or without.

Thus is authority within ourselves no less than without. Let us seek authority, and follow it. Let us learn to know authority, so that we may be able unerringly to distinguish between that which is authority for us and that which is not authority for us. Let us follow recognized authority in persons. Let us follow recognized authority in teachings. Let us follow authority in whatever garb, so that it give us the sense of growth, of increase; for to follow such authority is to follow our own higher, our larger selves externalized. And to follow is to become.

But let us not hesitate reverently to discard authority if perchance it ceases to induce in us such sense of growth and of increase. Reverently, because the authority has helped us. Reverently, [Page 16] because that which once has helped us is in fact always helping us, though we know it not; and shall ever help us, though maybe we cannot conceive this. Reverently, because our discarding is in reality the veil of an illusion of our ignorance, however needed the veil for the time may be. We are not in truth discarding. We are not discarding in terms of eternity, but only in terms of time. Reverently, because it may well be that our discarding is by no means as necessary to our well-being as we may deem it to be. Perchance it were better that we did not discard. Experience will tell us in due course. But, while irreverent discarding is in any case regrettable, infinitely regrettable because growth is adding and not subtracting, infinitely regrettable will be a discarding which some day may be seen as loss and not as gain, as a driving away of that still able to serve us, as a driving away of that which has served us well and has therefore deserved well of us, deserved our gratitude.

Let us strive to be sincere friends with authority, for authority in its true nature is the birth of the greater within the less, is the intimation of the whole within the part, is the seed of truthfulness within truthlessness, is the voice of God the Man within God the child. Let authority be fulfilled, not ignored. Let authority the intimation be sought within and without. Let authority the intimation be sought everywhere, for such authority [Page 17] every one needs. Let each individual find such authority within and seek it without. It is both without and within, and no one is there for whom it does not exist both without and within. And let such authority be fulfilled in due time in experience, in the merging of subject and object. Do not be afraid of authority — be it the authority of yourself, of another, of some teaching or theory, of some book or music, of some colour or form — provided you gain from these a sense of constant growth and increase. To fear authority is to be its slave. Do not even be afraid of the authority of the letter. Let the letter have its sway. The letter is the approach to the spirit, though there be many who seem to remain in the letter and move not towards the spirit. To remain in the letter when the letter has fulfilled its function, to remain in the letter without moving in the direction of the spirit, without desiring to move in the direction of the spirit, is to die. But each must decide for himself as to when the letter has been fulfilled, as to when he should be restless to pass beyond the letter, and even more as to the nature of the spirit involved in the letter itself; so that while obeying the letter, if letter there be, he gets ready to pass to the spirit within and to find a spirit infinitely different from the form in which it has garbed itself to win his notice. The letter killeth, truly. To live in the intimation, and never to strive to proceed to that to which it calls, is surely [Page 18] to decay and wither away. But to rejoice in the form so truly, so completely, as to gain vision of the substance of which the form is but a feeble shadow, and to pass onwards, as it were from the form, from the letter, into the glories that it hides as it proclaims: this surely is to live, and to live in ever-growing abundance. It is to pass from form to form, from form to life, from letter to spirit, and from life to life, from spirit to spirit, unceasingly, from an infinity of intimations to an infinity of experiences in an ascending crescendo of joy, of peace, of wisdom and of power. There is no form without its glory, life. There is no darkness without its light. There is no shadow without a shining substance. There is no letter without its word. We may not stay, but we may rest awhile. We may not dwell in prisons, but these may be gardens for us until we reach their limitations. And then we pass beyond the prison-walls, and as we

pass these disappear for us — leaving us free of erstwhile prison and of the garden into which we newly enter, until once again we reach its limitations and pass beyond to add another garden to our kingdom.

Do not be afraid because authority is not at first experience. Never is it experience at first. First it is intimation. Wisely journeying in authority, we reach experience. But faith and hope and trust, belief and confidence have their place in life no less than knowledge. [Page 19]

Grasp this aspect of authority with courage and with power, and drive it home; for when you drive it home you reach experience. But you must drive it home, blow by blow. Otherwise it ceases to be true authority for you. It becomes false for you. For when authority ceases to fulfil itself, to cause increase and growth, to lead towards experience, it does not merely leave you with your growth arrested, but takes away from you even that which you have and causes you to shrivel and dwarfen into lifelessness.

Authority is never negative. Either it increases stature, or it decreases stature; It never leaves stature the same. Its nature matters little. It may be person or thing, book or music, idea or action, form or perfume. What matters is what it does to you. And remember that its value can never lie in what other people may say it does to you. Face your authority, or any authority, yourself. Let there be no intervention save that of challenge to you: Are such authorities true for you? Do they cause you to grow? Do they lead you on the pathway of or to experience, that is, to realization of that of which they treat, identification with that of which they are in earlier stage the intimations?

If authority causes you to move away from the less to the more, from the shallows to the depths, from your unreal to your real, from your darkness to your light, then is such authority [Page 20] power for you, be it what it may for others. It is a freedom for you, be it a prison to others, do others declare that it is a prison also for you.

Do not complain if your authority be flouted by another, if your authority be despised by another, if another leave it and you “behind”. Be happy and at peace if, leave you as he may and perchance, as he ought, he leaves you in your truth, even if its form be an authority he flouts. It is truth that matters, neither authority nor form nor shape nor place. Where you dwell in truth, dwell happily, be its form what it may. Let another separate you from your authority, from your form of truth whatever it may be. Let him separate you if he can. If he can, he may have done well or ill. He will have done well if you are in fact dead in authority. He may have done ill, if the authority from which he has separated you is the opening for you into a larger life. In either case he separates you, he is able to separate you, because in fact the authority means little or naught to you. If you are alive in your authority, if your authority is alive in you, if intimations be fulfilling themselves in experience, if authority is a mode of transcendence, not more, not less, then none shall separate you from such authority, for it is your very heart and life.

Do not quit authority because others tell you to leave it. If you do so you are but substituting [Page 21] one authority for another. You do not quit authority when, on authority, you leave some other authority. You are not outside authority but within another. Those who tell you to leave may have left authority or an authority because they deem they have fulfilled it, or because, having weighed it in the balance, they deem they have found it wanting. As for you, you must judge for yourself. You must weigh for yourself. You must decide for yourself. Listen carefully to others' warnings. Heed with attention their advice. But

make up your own mind. Beware of being led astray from a pathway which is yours because others decry it. Because on the map of one of life's pilgrims a road is marked "not to be trodden", "dangerous", "unsafe", "leading no-whither", it does not follow that it must so be marked on your map. That which must so be marked for another is not necessarily so to be marked for you. That which is not to be trodden by another may be right for your treading. That which is dangerous and unsafe for another may not necessarily be dangerous or unsafe for you. That which for another leads no whither may lead somewhere for you. Be your own judge.

Take not authority lightly up. Enter not lightly into authority. Neither lay it lightly down, for, save experience, there is naught more precious than intimation; save the attainment of a goal, there is naught more precious [Page 22] than a vision of the path that leads to it; save achieving a triumph, there is naught more splendid than being steadfastly set towards it. And authority may at least turn us in the right direction, even though it merge, as we travel, into experience. Who, looking down the vistas of his past, shall say: "Authority has done naught for me?". Who, looking down the vistas of the future, dare say: "Authority has no more to do for me?". Who, looking down the vistas of the past, shall even say: "Blind obedience has done naught for me?". Who, looking down the vistas of the future, shall dare to say: "I have done with blind obedience?"

Sometimes, perhaps rarely, it is well to obey blindly. Is there never occasion for this? Is there never occasion to do as we are told, that some good end may be achieved which would not come were it to have to wait on our clear sight? Surely, sight is infinitely better than blindness. Surely, to see and walk with firm, unfaltering footsteps, is infinitely better than to be blind and to be led half-haltingly along. Yet sometimes it is better to move along a road in blindness rather than not to move along the road at all.

Do not, then, be afraid of an authority which no sense unfolded in you can justify, provided that somehow — maybe you know not how — dimly you apprehend within that authority an intimation towards a larger life. From the dim shadow of [Page 23] intimation you may pass onwards into the bright light of experience. Therefore, do not fear an authority which perhaps the head cannot justify but which the heart somehow approves. But sooner or later the time must come when head and heart are one in strong accord, or such authority is not for you as you at present are.

And when a time comes for you to lay an authority down, when you discover it is not for you, or when it has achieved its purposes, even then lay it reverently down. It is for someone if not for you. To some it is intimation of the larger life, though not to you. To some it is bread, though to you it be stone. But if it have helped you on your way, even though you deem you need it no more, then indeed would you do well to treat it with reverence; for though you may think you are laying it aside, in fact it has become part of you for ever, and at least in the more distant future you shall recognize a rung on which your feet rested on their way to rungs beyond. To that which at any time has served you, which has helped you on your way, you owe an imperishable debt of gratitude. Today, perchance, you may repudiate the debt, and seek to banish the authority out of sight. But with the softer, truer wisdom of tomorrow you will bless the debt you owe and place the authority, which now you cast aside, among the treasures of your home.