

Christian Leadership?

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We are constantly being told there is a 'crisis of authority'. Catholics in particular are always talking about authority and worrying about it, in fact they seem to have a sort of obsession about it—for or against. But they aren't the only ones who worry, it affects all aspects of public and private life. It affects, naturally, the idea of what kind of leadership—if any—Christians can give at a time like this, in a society like ours. Does the 'crisis' mean that the possibility of leadership has gone, at least for the time being? Is there any sense in Christians trying to shore up the crumbling walls of authority?

In order to answer questions of this kind we need to ask two others, which we seldom do ask because we take the answers for granted. These questions are first, What is authority? and secondly, What kind of society do we live in?

It's important to see exactly what we mean by authority, otherwise we are likely to waste a lot of time talking at cross-purposes.

Authority is primarily to do with community, in fact it is an essential ingredient of community. We tend to think of authority as synonymous with power, or government. Authority may involve the exercise of governing power, but that is not its nature.

It helps to realize that the word 'authority' has the same root as 'author'. We say, 'He's an authority on so and so'. We don't mean that he rules or governs the subject under discussion, but that he holds a position close to the *sources* of the subject, and has access to them. Therefore, he can speak with 'authority' on this subject—with clear and undoubted assurance that derives from that source or 'author'. So 'authority' means reference to the author, source, originator.

In the case of a community, then, authority means the community's reference to its source, or author. It has three main functions in the community:

It acts as a symbol of the author of the community, whether this be one person, or a legend, or a constitution or whatever. In England the Queen is such a symbol. She has little governing power, but she is the symbolic centre of the community, she sums up the nation's being, as a community. (Or at least that is what the monarchy is meant to do. Whether it is able to do so effectively at a given time is another matter.)

Authority is also what shows the 'shape' of a community. The way authority (reference to origin or source) works shows what kind of

community this is, for what purpose it exists. If the community is of a kind that is intended to continue, then part of this aspect of authority is its function in providing continuity. It is the framework of authority that 'hands on' its purpose and nature to the next generation. This is tradition—the continuing of a community according to its own special nature. A patriarchal community, for instance, will show by the way its life is organized that it looks to the 'father' as the community's source and centre, the thing that shows what kind of community this is, and what it is for: essentially in this case a family type of life, concerned with its internal welfare.

Thirdly, authority is the means by which the community's purpose in being is carried out. This may be implicit in its structure, as in the case of a patriarchal community, but in some cases a traditional habit of life is not enough, and constantly new decisions have to be made. For this, government—the direct exercise of power in one form or other—is needed in order to take and implement decisions. For instance, in a group formed in order to dig for gold, there would have to be a recognized method of deciding where to do it, and when, and who would have what share of the profits. This organization for decision-making would also show what kind of community this was—a purely business one—and therefore one whose origin is simply desire for money. Here are the three functions of authority in operation.

The governing aspect of authority is the one that has tended almost to obliterate the others. This is natural enough because decision-making is the function most likely to cause conflict and need re-thinking.

It is worth noticing that all the functions of authority, when it is working well, produce an effect which is an important condition of a community's life and effectiveness. That is, a sense of certainty, of being in a right relation to others, a sense of comfort and security. Security can degenerate into complacency and apathy, but complacency is, in fact, one of the signs that authority is *not* functioning properly. This happens when the three functions have become unbalanced. For instance, a strong sense of one's origin combined with a lack of organization for making decisions, and no clear purpose beyond personal enlightenment produces a slightly hysterical atmosphere, such as one finds in certain small fundamentalist sects. Or if the type of community is very clear, but is only implicit, so that it has no obvious purpose, and no symbolic centre, you get one sort of middle-class family set-up, which lives firmly by accepted and unexamined standards and customs. The members are fairly independent and feel no particular responsibility for each other, but everyone rubs along fairly well living in the same home. This clearly is a family, it is arranged in that pattern. But the parents do not act as a real self-definition of the community, and there is no overall purpose. Our national community tends towards this type of

imbalance, with its characteristic apathy. Imbalance on the side of government is too common to need comment.

The three functions of authority are in fact always present in some degree, but all of them will be expressed in quite different ways at different periods and in different settings.

Recent research in anthropology—in particular, Mary Douglas's brilliant if slightly incoherent book, *Purity and Danger*—shows very clearly that there are two main *types* of authority. One shows itself by a power that is inherent in the organized structures of society. Power is articulated in a planned way through official structures, is predictable and clear-cut. This kind of authority happens in well-organized, hopeful communities that are in control of their environment and feel reasonably sure of themselves. The symbolic source of the community, its shape or structure, and the carrying out of its purposes are all official.

The other evidence of power happens in communities that are not fully in control of their environment (including themselves), that feel threatened, or which have not yet achieved or have lost self-confidence as a group. In this state of affairs the structures of official authority are likely to command little respect because they cannot cope with the perils that threaten, whether these be enemies, natural forces, or psychological dangers. The manifestations of power are likely, then, to break out where the structures break down. This will occur in unofficial ways and in people who have no official status—or at least apart from their official status. They will be such people as wizards, mediums, 'born leaders', demagogues, or prophets. They will happen in the 'cracks' of the structures, and may weaken them still further, or act as substitutes for them. The community will look for its meaning and source of life in such unofficial outbreaks of unpredictable power, it will recognize its 'kind' or 'purpose' in this indefinable relationship with mystery, and its purpose also will be mysterious, so that obedience cannot be other than blind, but convinced.

For in both cases there is power at work, and this power is expressing the source and nature and purpose of the community. It is, in fact, authoritative. A community is at its healthiest when it lives by both kinds of authority, working together, and exercising all three functions in a sensible balance. This is, ideally, how the Church should work, for the two kinds of authority are clearly descriptions of institutional authority and charismatic authority. When they work together as they should, the Church should see Christ as its source and centre, officially symbolized in its officers, charismatically shown in the holiness of its members, the two meeting and mutually enriching each other in the sacramental encounter with Christ, in which he renews his authorship. It should recognize its shape or kind in its official organizations, local communities and so on, and also in the bond of love that makes them one

—these, too, sealed and blended in common worship—and it should carry out its purpose through well-organized structure for making and executing practical designs, which are given motive and life by the power of the Spirit working in those who carry them out or initiate them—officially or not.

Mostly, of course, this ideal balance doesn't occur. We fall on the side either of official decision at the expense of charismatic inspiration, or we exalt individual inspiration at the expense of the unity required for practical action.

All this—the anthropologist's analysis of the two kinds of power, and their obvious application to the theology of the Church—is not of merely theoretical interest. It is immediately and vitally and practically important in considering what Christian leadership can possibly mean in our society.

I am not a sociologist, and cannot do more than look at our society in terms available to any layman. But even on a superficial view it is quite clear that we are not dealing with *one* society, except in a very arbitrary sense. We are deceived into supposing that we are by the fact that everyone has to obey the same laws, pay the same taxes, use the same roads, services and so on. In fact, what we have, within this official framework, is two cultures so different that they scarcely touch at any point.

I think it will be clearer if I compare our situation with a familiar historical one.

The Roman Empire in its decline had roughly the same kind of authority structure that we have. The structures that expressed its origin, shape and purpose had grown up to meet real needs, to express a real national pride and sense of mission. They worked, when they did, because the whole thing—the Emperor, the laws, the tradition of historical greatness—actually meant something personal and real and important to each citizen, even if he disliked or rebelled against aspects of it.

In the dying years of the Empire the structures persisted, but they gradually lost their meaning. The traditions lost their personal force and became empty survivals valued out of nostalgia or fear of change rather than as living symbols. (Much of our carefully preserved pageantry is of this type—which is not to say it should be abolished, if people like it. Any roots may be better than none at all.) The Emperor had to reinforce his waning symbolic power by more and more exaggerated claims because he no longer really *meant* the source and life of the people. The symbol was no longer cohesive. Authority, in fact, was breaking down, although power to govern was as strong as and often more ruthless than ever before.

We are in the same situation. The structures that grew up to build and maintain an Empire with a sense of purpose and an almost sacral attitude to tradition is still there—but the meaning has gone, and only the structures remain, substantially unchanged. And the

same thing is happening to us as happened to the dying Empire of Rome. When authority goes, community goes. There is a loss of confidence, a sense of futility. People feel isolated, purposeless. So they look for any respite from futility, they search for a sense of meaning, however fleeting, wherever it can be found—in 'living it up', in sport, drugs, sex, L.S.D.—anything, however bizarre, that will produce a 'happening', a feeling of discovery for a moment.

So the structures that remain are not fulfilling their original purpose, they have no meaning as human, therefore no meaning as authority. They continue because we are used to them, and they work, more or less—and above all because the alternative is chaos. Even a tedious and meaningless round of routine is better than total anarchy. So we keep the structures, and even strengthen them, despite their failure to produce the results we hoped for.

But this is not the whole picture.

The dying Empire was threatened by the barbarian cultures surrounding it. In fact, it was the threat of the barbarians that very largely kept the structures of the Empire going. It was the Romans, of course, who called the encroaching tribes 'barbarians', because from their point of view any culture but theirs was 'barbarous', that is, uncivilized and dangerous. Their culture was, to them, not 'a' culture, but just culture, the norm of human living, the 'decent' way to live.

If I apply the word to the other culture that makes up our society, I am not using the word in the pejorative sense that we normally attach to it. Like the Romans, we think of our own dying Empire culture, with all its admitted drawbacks, as the norm. We compare others with it and judge them to their disadvantage. To us, then—and I speak from out of the dying Empire culture because that is the one in which I belong, whether I like it or not—the other culture that flourishes among us is barbarian, peculiar and dangerous. But apart from the adoption of that point of view—because I cannot honestly claim any other—I use the word in anything but a pejorative sense. The comparison is illuminating in several ways.

First of all, it is necessary to recognize that an indigenous barbarian culture is not a new phenomenon, nor is it a phenomenon of youth, as we are inclined to think. We think it is new because it is only recently that it has been presented to us, in novels and plays, from something approximating to its own point of view. Even so, the presentation has been a bit self-conscious, and coloured by philosophical pre-conceptions acquired by people who do come from this culture but have been through a system of education that is entirely derived from the dying Empire culture. But it was there, long before people wanted to see it for itself. It ferments under the surface of Victorian novels of working-class life, only it is scarcely recognizable because it is interpreted entirely in terms of the Imperial culture from which all writers drew their framework of thought, and which

still had, in those days, a conviction of its own inevitable and immovable normality. So much so that even the 'barbarians' learned to think of themselves in terms of 'Roman' civilization and adopted 'Roman' customs and thought-forms as far as their economic condition allowed. (As indeed the original barbarians eventually did.) In these circumstances, the real barbarian culture could only make itself felt indirectly, or in 'picturesque' episodes, like the 'pearly' King and Queen of the Costers.

Then, besides feeling that it is new, we are also given to dismissing the barbarian culture as a youthful extravagance. Naturally, the young are most likely to be extreme and outspoken in their self-assertion. And they are now in a position to assert themselves, whereas the young of earlier generations were damped down by long hours of work and very little money. The older people are tired; they want, chiefly, to be quiet. But it would be a mistake to suppose that the lethargy that comes from years of fatigue and the struggle with a basically defeating situation is in fact an adoption of 'Imperial' (that is middle-class British) attitudes and values. On the other hand, in a society in which economic stability and social acceptability are equated in every magazine and newspaper ad. with the acceptance of these values, it is not surprising if the less resilient and pugnacious gradually adopt them as they got older, at least if their financial condition allows them to. To be a middle-aged or elderly barbarian, nowadays, and not adopt the ways of the Imperial culture, you have to be either unusually self-assured, or unusually pugnacious, or else below a certain economic level, especially where housing is concerned, which is often a more important factor than actual income.

So it is naturally among the young that the barbarian culture can be most clearly seen. It is so different from anything we know, that it is hard to describe it in a detached way (as opposed to in a novel, a film or a poem) without sounding patronizing, but that risk has to be taken.

The outstanding difference, which is found in all cultures of this type, is a lack of individual self-consciousness. There simply isn't the kind of complex, introverted language available to make this possible. We, who are used to a language of intense individual self-consciousness, can only interpret this as a *lack*, but that is a matter of our own point of view. What we don't have, and the barbarians have, is a strong group identity. Its self-consciousness is expressed in its leaders, and its leaders are people who emerge because of personal gifts that seem to embody what the group wants to think about itself. In a real sense, they *are* their 'followers', as the kings and chiefs of those earlier barbarians authentically defined the meaning of their people, and similar leaders still do in other parts of the world. The leaders of the barbarians are *heroes*, not kings, however. The leadership is charismatic, not official, perhaps because the

official framework of the 'other' culture is so oppressive that anything of that kind is suspect. The leaders—whether they are leaders of small groups, or the almost legendary 'pop' heroes—are followed with enormous devotion which can reach the point of hysteria, but can also involve an obedience that sets no limits. The law-and-order morality of the dying Empire is literally meaningless to the barbarians. It is there, and may have to be obeyed if the alternative is obviously much worse, but it has no moral force whatever. It really is important to realise this. We often put down 'delinquency' to lack of moral sense and training—but often the reason is that the laws that are broken have no moral meaning to those who break them. They are the laws of the enemy, to be defied, or evaded when possible, or suffered when necessary. The barbarians are not immoral or even amoral, they have a different morality, one based on group loyalty, and in that context personal honour and honesty and devotion *are* important. It is a morality that can embrace any amount of deceit and treachery in relation to the codes of the enemy, but which enforces a high standard of courage, endurance, faithfulness (including sexual faithfulness within its own terms) and loyalty even to death. It may seem to us ruthless and horrifyingly cruel. But if you want to get the atmosphere read the 'Chanson de Roland'. The ethos is the same.

To clinch the matter, it is helpful to notice that barbarian cultures normally express themselves in exuberance of decoration and dress. Only a fool—or a convinced Roman—would imagine that long hair, violently coloured clothes, brass-studded belts, bracelets and earrings are signs of degeneracy or effeminacy in young men. Among the genuine barbarians they are what they have always been in barbarian cultures—signs of aggressive and defiant virility. Among those who copy them (and some young Romans of the decadent Empire did the same) they are a sign of a desire to share the vitality and 'sap' of a culture they do not understand but cannot help admiring. The fact that the only music that catches the imagination of the young—of all classes—at this moment springs directly from the barbarian culture, and is quite aware of its roots, is further proof, if any is needed.

There is one thing about the new barbarians which is really new, and, I think, unique. That is the fact that the girls frequently wear the same kind of clothes as the boys. This slightly defiant and often fearful experimenting with their status has an unsettling effect on the composition of the group, and detracts from the general self-confidence of the barbarian culture, because the girls are not as clear-cut in their attitude inside the groups as they are in their attitude to the 'outside', which they share with the boys. It is too soon to say how this will work out, but it is one of the things that makes the whole situation more peculiar and less predictable than it might have been.

The other factor that makes the situation much less clear-cut than

that with which I compared it (the original Roman and barbarian set-up) is that these two cultures interact. They did to a great extent in the dying Roman Empire, but the influence of television and magazines and even books (as the education available to the young barbarian improves) makes the impact of the dying Empire culture on the barbarians constant and strong. There is an obvious influence the other way, too, and the mixture is not easy to live with, either way. The aggressive self-confidence of the barbarian despises the dying Empire with a total and venomous contempt, but all the same it is undermined by it. The hatred is shot through with disillusion and the pervasive sense of futility. The pride is undermined by cynicism. The clear-cut, if savage, sexual morality of barbarism is mixed with the futile recklessness of the decaying Imperial morality.

It is clear that the barbarian culture has, left to itself, a very powerful sense of itself, a real authority, mainly a charismatic one. And side by side with it is the dying Empire, in which the structures of ancient authority are emptied of meaning, as authority, but are used to try to control or suppress—better still, *convert*—the barbarians, because they are to be feared. So there is a total lack of comprehension, and an increasing inability to contain, let alone end, the conflict. Every White Paper and Royal Commission on crime, education, housing, the police, youth clubs or whatever shows the widening and terrifying gap.

In such a situation what can Christians do?

First we can realize the situation, in the light of the analysis of the two cultures.

On the one hand, we have a culture that has lost any sense of community at all, that is isolated, cynical and apathetic.

On the other hand, we have a culture with a very strong and even passionate sense of community, but whose leadership is itself too much influenced by the values of the other culture, and also by the short-term objective of simply *fighting* it, to have a clear sense of communal purpose.

If the comparison I have drawn from history is valid, then it may help to see what, in fact, Christians in the past have done to meet the same kind of situation.

For instance, the Church at the time of Augustine was functioning in just such a dying Empire culture as ours. In that divided and disillusioned and corrupt civilization there was a Church of small dioceses, in which the relation between bishop and people was close and personal and often very bad-tempered. But it was never merely administrative. In other words, the form which authority—reference to the author, Christ—took in this set-up was exactly what it needed. The authority-framework was a close-knit, rather egalitarian and definitely emotional relationship around the bishop. He had considerable power but was not exempt from either adulation or abuse, and he had been elected by his own people, who consequently felt

very much involved in him, as their symbolic centre. In an impersonal and meaningless bureaucracy there were these extremely personal and quite clearly meaningful and purposeful communities. But these communities, for all their warmth and immediacy, were organized on clearly structured lines, their leadership was official, and officially chosen, it did not just emerge, though naturally personal qualities were the deciding factor in making the choice. This official character of authority would make sense to a culture that was both attracted by and afraid of more mysterious manifestations of power. Within this reassuring officialness the charismatic influence would be felt as an inspiration rather than as a threat. An official structure that clearly pointed to Christ made sense of life without destroying its supports.

In a very different set-up, the barbarian tribes of Northern Europe were utterly unimpressed by the Church's official organization. It was simply another version of the Empire, and had no spiritual meaning or any hope of conveying one, however justly and humanely administered. What did get through—the impact of it survives in hundreds upon hundreds of legends and tales—was the charismatic power breaking out in individual Christians, or in communities. It was real authority, it showed clearly that *Christ* was the source of this community in which *his* power could work out in such staggering ways. It was saints—hundreds of them—that converted Northern Europe. Some of them were bishops, most were not—but it was not the fact of their official status that displayed to the northern kingdoms the authority of Christ, but the power of the Spirit working in *unofficial* ways. These people had a community, had leaders. The saints of that time, mostly monks, gave to the community a deeper meaning in Christ, and to the leadership a dimension and a purpose beyond group survival or conquest. The barbarians recognized sanctity when they saw it because their group self-awareness made the individual defendedness of the more sophisticated civilization unnecessary. They could, and did, respond to it, and the outbreaks of power were the 'unofficial' ones one would expect in a community that, although strong and courageous, is defiantly aware of surrounding danger and the undefined limits of its knowledge. Yet, in the Church, these manifestations of power—miracles of all kinds—were never individual freaks or feats. They happened within, though not by, the framework of official authority, which itself gave a meaning and a clear definition as Christian to the charismatic power.

If we did it once, we can do it again. What we need is a close-knit, mutually aware and even emotional Church relationship, which yet has the stability and tradition of an official inheritance, an authority that consciously and historically refers the community to Christ, and can make decisions in his name. But the quality of relationship in the Christian community should be such that we *can*

allow the Spirit to blow as he wishes. The charismata are not lacking because the age of miracles is past, but because we don't want them. Yet, we are actually being given exactly what we need, to lead and to serve both cultures, if only we would see it.

In the dark ages, Christian consciousness led to the springing up in many places of communities of celibates of either sex, who wanted to realize Christ in their common life more fully than they felt able to do in the conditions of their normal lives. Nowadays, groups of Christians are doing the same kind of thing, for the same reason. All over the place, communities are springing up, but because keeping alive is no longer a full-time job they can do this without necessarily abandoning their ordinary jobs. And there is another great difference, too—a great many of these communities are made up of married couples. In fact, the development of an understanding of the meaning of marriage as Christian is also one of the revolutionary things that is happening to the Church.

The other—more obviously revolutionary—thing is the way the new growth of social consciousness among the richer nations has been translated into a renewed Christian understanding of poverty, and a desire to discard whatever might impede the brotherhood of man, the coming of Christ's Kingdom. The typical charism of our time is the dedication to voluntary poverty.

Take these three things together: starting with the new communities often with married members. If marriage is a sign of Christ's love, which makes the Church what it is, then the quality of love that binds its members (married or not) should be of this kind—as deep and personal and immediate as that of marriage. In that case, the new communities are the model of the Church for our time—they occur within the traditional structures, they often *are* official, they are the nuclei, perhaps of large communities that will take over, without a break, the inherited structures of authority and re-express them as authentically Christian.

Within such a Christian community—diverse, imperfect, but real, and also with the stability of an official and traditional character—the power of the Spirit can break out in healing, in preaching, in rejoicing, in leading. People can *afford* to accept the vocation of poverty because their love of their brethren is their support. People can afford to love, because they are loved. This is the only kind of leadership worth giving, or that is in any way likely to be effective. Dictators are easy to find. Saints are not. But if we need them, they will happen. But only if we want them to happen, only if we are prepared to put aside fears and prejudices and listen to the voice of the Spirit. And we shall be a new creation, and renew the face of the earth.